

Waiting for lost luggage, liberation came instead

By Necee Regis
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

VALENCIA, Spain — The airport luggage carousel goes around and around. Who are these lucky people who push through the mob and claim their bags first? If luggage retrieval were a lottery game, I'd lose my money every time.

The crowd thins. The mechanism that spits out bags, randomly and sporadically like beads thrown from a carnival float, has stopped. As a few unclaimed suitcases rumble past on the belt, I realize with a sinking feeling that I am the only person still waiting.

A delayed flight from John F. Kennedy International Airport to Madrid caused a missed connection, but I figure my bag will eventually arrive. I file a claim, with the luggage ID code and the address of my hotel, and leave, assured it will be found and delivered, possibly that afternoon.

I wander the streets in this bustling Mediterranean seaside town, overdressed in clothes donned yesterday morning for the flight: pants, long-sleeve shirt, socks, and leather shoes. Did I

mention the temperature is in the 90s?

And that it's Sunday? Most stores appear to be closed. The banks are closed. The streets are oddly empty. I stumble upon a local department store and it's humming inside. I thought everyone was at the beach but, no, the town's population is here in this six-story wonder, riding escalators, buying perfume, and spending euros.



... not mine ...

I see everything a traveler without luggage could possibly need. Using mime-like gestures (my foreign language skills are of the American variety), I locate a few necessities, just in case my bag is delayed a day: two sleeveless tops, some underwear, flip-flops with a stylish graffiti pattern. The salesperson removes the tags and I exit wearing my new fashions, satisfied and cooler. Things are looking up. I stop for pizza and a glass of wine before heading back to the hotel.

My room has a few basics: comb, shampoo, soap. For the long flight, I had a toothbrush in my carry-on purse. I make a mental inventory of what I'm missing: toiletries, vitamins, various over-the-counter medicines, prescription medicines, my favorite black pants from Miami, my favorite

stretchy orange tank top, my favorite lime green sun hat from France, my favorite . . . well, just about everything.

I had been so pleased with myself before embarking on this two-week European trip. I managed to squeeze everything into a small suitcase that could have fit in the airplane's overhead bin. Why did I check my bag? The hotel personnel nod their heads in sympathy. They call the airport. They call the airlines. There is no record of the bag existing anywhere in the known universe, but they are certain it will be found. Maybe tomorrow. Of course it will. It must.

On my second day I move, as planned, to another hotel a few miles away at the beach. The staff at Hotel No. 1 assures me they will call Hotel No. 2 if my bags arrive. I'm certain they use the word "if" and not "when," and a small knot forms in my stomach. I raid the hotel bathroom — snatching tiny bottles of shampoo, conditioner, and lotion — just in case.

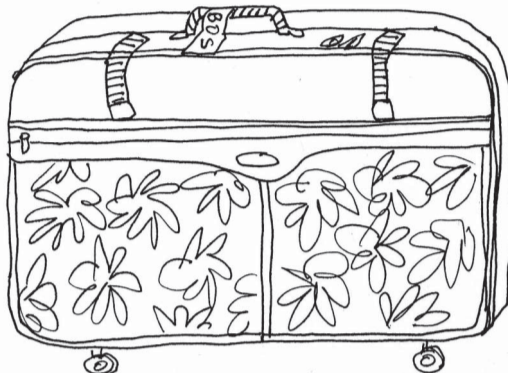
Since I'm traveling on a budget, I can't go out willy-nilly and buy more clothes. At the new hotel, I launder my few sweaty garments and drape them across any available surface to dry. The room looks like the Beverly Hillbillies suite.

On the third day, the

staff at Hotel No. 2 assures me they are calling the airlines "every three hours."

I gaze longingly at the stunning pool and can't stop thinking about the brand new Speedo I packed for the trip. But hey, I'm in Europe, so I peel off my clothes and — voila! My black underwear morphs into a chic bikini. No one pays any attention as I backstroke across the wide expanse of blue. And then a curious thing happens: I feel liberated, I feel lighter, without all my stuff.

In the evening, I wander along the beach promenade, past vendors grilling corn and couples strolling arm in arm in the waning sun, and find a seemingly endless row of tents with all manner of inexpensive goods for sale. Facing my fourth day — and possibly an entire trip — without luggage (I'm flying to a new city on Day 5) my



... not mine ...

ILLUSTRATIONS BY NECCEE REGIS

survival skills kick in.

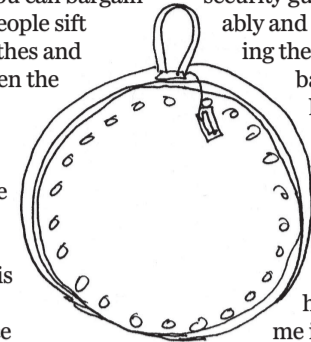
This flea market is a lot like shopping at the old Filene's Basement, except that you can bargain with the vendors. People sift through piles of clothes and try things on between the tables and racks. There are bargains galore. Capri pants: only 3 euros! A table of shirts: 2 euros! Scarves: 1 euro!

I pull some capris on over the white jeans I've worn since leaving Boston four days ago. They're a good enough fit. I gather a handful of shirts and try one on but it bunches up over my clothes. I eye the crowd: People are in bathing suits, beach wraps, and other assorted casual attire. What the heck, I think, and whip off my shirt, pretending again that I'm wearing a bathing suit.

But then another dilemma: The only shirt that fits is pink. I am not a pink person. Pink is for little girls, or teenagers, or women with beautiful dark skin, not pasty white flesh like mine. When it comes to fashion I'm pink-phobic.

I hand the man 2 euros. I find some pants with pink and tan stripes. I also buy a white scarf, a black cap, and a bathing suit. I find a small duffel bag for my new purchases.

Back at the airport, I query the airline one last time. A kindly ticket agent calls a sympathetic security guard who — unbelievably and most probably breaking the rules — leads me



... not mine ...

back into the forlorn-looking "Room of Lost Luggage." No luck. But wait, he motions and we head deeper into the building through a maze of halls into what he tells me is, if I understand him correctly, the domain of customs and security. There, among a handful of other suitcases, I am reunited with my bag.

When had it arrived? Why was it in security? Would the airlines ever have found it in this remote place? Who knows? For whatever reason it landed here and in my glee I don't care. I sign some papers and catch my flight.

Back in Boston, I have a new fondness for my emergency purchases, wearing my pink ensemble to a recent concert on the Esplanade.

"You look good in pink. It's your color," says a friend who never knew of my phobia.

"I got these clothes in Europe. Five euros! Can you believe my luck?" I say, and smile.

Contact Necee Regis, a freelance writer in Boston and Miami, at neceeregis@yahoo.com.

Where Tarzan and Jane can just have fun

► CLIMBING
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Recreational tree climbers use a special climbing harness, a self-belay system and ropes to hoist themselves into trees, a technique that doesn't require extraordinary strength. Once they are aloft, they can thread their way through the branches into the canopy, using ropes to create a "vertical hiking trail." (Leather or nylon rope sleeves, called cambium savers, protect branches from abrasion.)

Climbers can also swing between branches like Tarzan or Jane; do "flying traverses," climbing from one tree to another without descending to the ground; or go "tree surfing," sitting on high branches and swaying with a tree in the wind. Or they can just hang out, literally.

& THINK IT'S FOR THE BIRDS?

Watch Kari J. Bodnarchuk take up the subject in an audio slideshow on boston.com.

"I like to find a place where I can tie in using a secondary rope and just lay back and take a nap," said Buck, 55, who has been tree climbing for a year and a half. "When you're 60 feet up in a tree and a gentle breeze is blowing, it's unbelievably calming. For me, it's a very contemplative experience."

Arborist Peter Jenkins founded the country's first recreational tree-climbing school, Tree Climbers International, on a forested patch of land in Atlanta in 1983. He hit on the idea of recreational tree climbing while pruning trees for clients in the area.

"I was swinging through the trees, laughing and having a great time," said Jenkins. "People kept come up to me and saying, 'That looks like fun. Can you take me up there?'"

Since then, Jenkins and his staff have taken tens of thousands of people up into the arboreal realm. Nearly a dozen other schools have sprouted across the country, some in the most unlikely places. The New York Botanical Garden in the Bronx, offers one- and three-day recreational tree-climbing workshops through its continuing education program. Participants get a chance to scale a London planetree or scarlet oak, and view the city from lofty heights.

"It's a very light, fun class," said Josh Gallely, one of the instructors, who has a degree in urban forestry and landscape horticulture from the University of Vermont and works as an arborist for the city's Department of Parks & Recreation. "We show people as many techniques as we can on how to get up in a tree, but the emphasis is on having a good time."

In the United States, schools and individual instructors typically offer short introductory climbs, allowing participants to get a feel for the activity. No climbing experience is required, and the guide provides all equipment and takes care of the preparation, such as setting the ropes in trees.

Many schools also offer a basic tree-climbing course (usually an 18- to 20-hour, one-weekend program), where climbers learn the skills they need to safely climb trees on their own, like how to choose and rig a tree, and how to tie knots and use climbing equipment. Advanced certification is offered for climbers interested in becoming facilitators (those who can take people on guided or introductory climbs, like Joslin and Buck) or instructors (those trained to teach recreational tree climbing).

Some instructors have branched out and created more unusual tree-climbing programs. Tim Kovar, who runs Tree Climbing



Nancy Aleo savors the view from a hammock about 30 feet high in Franklin Park. Genevieve Summers runs Dancing With Trees in Alto, Ga., and here navigates a ceiba tree in the Amazon rain forest of northern Peru and climbs in moonlight.

Northwest in Grants Pass, Ore., offers Tree Top Tables, a romantic, three-hour candlelight dinner, 50 feet above ground. Kovar hoists up "sky chairs" and a custom-made table complete with Velcro on top to prevent dishes from slipping off — and serves a three-course meal.

The more adventurous can also go tree-top camping at Dancing With Trees, a recreational tree-climbing school in the foothills of the Smoky Mountains in northern Georgia. Here, Genevieve Summers, a former chimney sweep who is now one of the country's leading recreational tree-climbing instructors, runs B&B in the Treetops. On these overnight trips, climbers bring their sleeping bags and pillows 60 feet up a white oak and sleep in four-cornered, canvas hammocks called "tree boats."

There, climbers can tune into the animal and bird calls, watch stars filter through the canopy, and hear leaves rustling and trees creaking in the nighttime breezes.

"I won't say you're going to get the best night's sleep," said Summers, 55. "The moon may be rising or you may hear owl calls and all sorts of unfamiliar sounds."

Anne Ellinger of Arlington took her son Micah, then 9, on an overnight at Dancing With Trees several years ago.

"We heard this mournful, eerie howling

sound in the middle of the night," Ellinger recalled.

The sound turned out to be chickens at a farm a couple of miles away, making a racket during their feeding time.

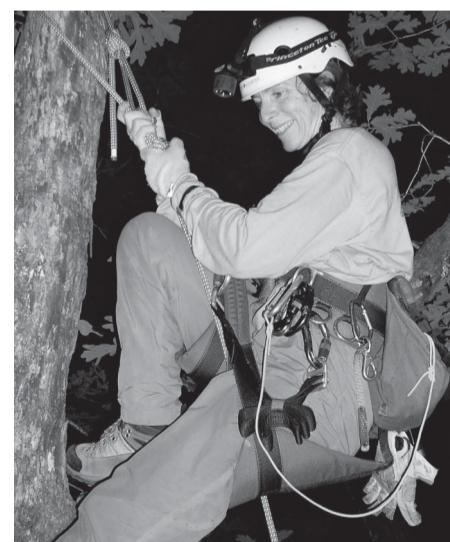
Come morning, after a sensory-filled night, Summers serves her guests boiled eggs, bagels and cream cheese, bananas, and PowerBars — on cloth napkins. Then climbers make their descent.

"I'm not that strong, but you don't have to be to climb a tree," said Ellinger. "It's about as hard as stepping up a ladder. You just inch yourself 60 feet up in the air on a rope," and then slide down using a simple belay technique.

Tree climbing does require some stamina, especially out West, where climbers scale sitka spruce, Douglas firs, and ponderosa pines that may reach heights of 250 feet.

The sport is accessible to people of all ages and abilities. Summers has taken children as young as 4 climbing, and last year, she guided 81-year-old Marge Felder up a tree to celebrate her birthday. Arbor Quest Unlimited, a Michigan-based, nonprofit organization run by a group of medical professionals, works specifically with people who have physical or mental disabilities.

Recreational tree climbing may sound risky, but it's a safe activity with no recorded



DOMINIC CHAVEZ/GLOBE STAFF (LEFT), DANCING WITH TREES (TOP, BOTTOM)

deaths or serious injuries in 23 years, according to Summers.

"Climbers can get 'bark bites,' which are scratches from brushing up against the trees," she said. "But I tell my students they haven't had a good climb unless they have bark in their underwear!"

Buck and Joslin take people tree climbing at no cost in Eastern Massachusetts, on a participant's private land or in public areas where they've gotten permission to climb. They also hold public climbs each month in the Boston area.

"So far, everyone who's gone up in the trees is thrilled to be out there," said Joslin. "But it's more dramatic for adults because it's something they never expected to really enjoy."

Added Buck, "We can get you up there even higher and a lot safer than when you were a kid."

Joslin and Buck both received their facilitator training from Summers.

"It was really thorough," Buck said. "Genevieve wouldn't let us go out into the wild until we could go up a tree and retie our knots while blindfolded."

Contact Kari Bodnarchuk, an adventure-travel writer and photographer in Portland, Maine, at travelwriter@karib.us.

If you go . . .

The following groups and individuals run tree-climbing classes, courses, or adventures:

Tree Climbing Adventures in Eastern Massachusetts are offered by Andrew Joslin (andrew@47custer.com) and Paul Bucks (bucks.javanet@verizon.net).

New York Botanical Garden Bronx River Parkway 718-817-8747; www.nybg.org One-day class in spring and fall, three-day class in early summer.

Dancing With Trees Alto, Ga. 706-778-8847

www.dancingwithtrees.com Classes year-round by appointment, including private guided climbs (\$125 per person, maximum two people); Intro to Tree Climbing (\$250 minimum for groups of up to 10); B&B in the Treetops (\$235 per person); basic course (\$450), facilitator's course (\$850), and single-rope technique course (\$400).

Tree Climbers International Atlanta 404-377-3150

www.treeclimbing.com Introductory climbs twice a month (\$15 per person); basic course (\$450); rigging course (\$225); facilitator's course (\$750).

Tree Climbing USA Fayetteville, Ga. 770-487-6929

www.treeclimbingusa.com Basic course (\$400) once a month; beyond the basics (\$300); facilitator's course (\$375).

Tree Climbing Colorado 303-526-2904

www.treeclimbingcolorado.com Introductory climbs (\$25) and a basic course (\$450).

Arbor Quest Unlimited www.arborquest.org

Based in Bloomfield, Mich., this nonprofit organization runs guided tree-climbing trips for people of all ability levels, but specializes in working with those who have disabilities.

Tree Climbing Northwest Grants Pass, Ore. 866-223-3371

www.treeclimbingnorthwest.com Half-day guided climbs (\$125; \$225 for two; four hours); basic course (\$450), rigging course (\$200), single-rope course (\$250), facilitator's course (\$750); public and private tree-climbing adventures (\$12-\$20 per person); ZZZs in the TreeZ overnight (\$200 for one; \$300 for two); candlelight dinner in the trees (\$350 for two); and Tree Week, a weekend camp (\$900).

Pacific Tree Climbing Institute Eugene, Ore. 866-653-8733

www.pacifictreeclimbing.com Guided climbs using single-rope technique (\$200-\$250); private instruction (\$65 per hour); treetop camping (\$500-\$550).

Kansas City Tree Climbers Club Kansas City, Kan. 913-432-6411