THE CONCIERGE

DEPARTURE POINTS

My big sis led the way in traveling

By Molly Underwood

My sister is 18 months older than I am, but I'm taller. It used to drive her crazy as we were growing up when people asked whether we were twins or, worse, if I was older.

I thought it was obvious. She was friendly, confident and funny. I was proud to follow her.

And follow her I did, from kindergarten all through high school. Our paths diverged at college. She spent her junior year abroad in Sydney, Australia, and had friends all over Europe.

A family medical emergency brought her back home after graduation, but she later found a way back to Europe. She spent a year in London studying international business and hopped to other countries on breaks; she picnicked at Versailles, France, and saw the northern lights in Norway.

I finished college and stayed put in Pasadena. I loved hearing her stories and seeing her pictures.

After her stint in the U.K., she settled in San Diego, but travel was never far from her heart.

Early last year, she told me about a deal on plane tickets to London. She hadn't been back in five years. I told her, half-jokingly, to book it, and she emailed me the flight confirmations for a 10-day trip — my 30th birthday present, she said.

Well, then.

We had visited London as children on a family summer vacation two decades ago. There was a lot of art I didn't fully appreciate at age 10, long before I majored in history.

I gave her a long list of things I had to see (Buckingham Palace; Kensington Palace; and such staples as the British Museum, the National Gallery and the National Portrait Gallery, and the Tate).

Our biggest adventure was Chatsworth House, the seat of the Duke of Devonshire and home to the Cavendish family since 1549. (It's best recognized as Pemberley in the Keira Knightley-starring "Pride and Prejudice.")

We stayed at an inn on the Chatsworth property and, despite asking the front desk attendant for directions twice, still managed to get lost.

A kind man helped us. Once we crossed the road, we were on our way. Walking through fields of sheep in the English countryside felt like a Jane Austen movie moment.

My sister planned everything, from train tickets to the Airbnb where we stayed in Camden. She timed our entrances to museums and didn't give me too much side-eye when, after touring a museum for two hours, I spotted a postcard in the gift shop that showed a piece I had to see.

Strangely enough, I think my favorites were the pieces I didn't expect. Turning the corner at Hampton Court Palace and coming face to face with "Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting (La Pittura)," by Artemisia Gentileschi, took my breath away.

It wasn't all museums. She showed me where she used to live and the pubs she frequented. I met her friends, matching names to faces, and imagined them as young adventurers, hungry to see the world. I marveled at how they hadn't lost that sense of wonder. I think it was the most beautiful thing I saw on our trip.

We also went to the exhibit of Leonardo da Vinci's drawings at the Queen's Gallery in Buckingham Palace. One of my favorite quotes of his: "It had long since come to my attention that people of accomplishment rarely sat back and let things happen to them. They went out and happened to things."

Thank you, my adventurous big sister, for exemplifying this, for saying yes when it would have been easier to say no.

All these years later, I'm still proud to follow you.

I've already started another list of things I can't wait to see with you.

Cat O'Neil For The Times

ON THE SPOT CATHARINE HAMM

3 questions to ask before you fly again

If you sometimes feel as though the world is conspiring against you and your flight plans, wonder no more. It is — but for different reasons, although all fall under the banner of the "state of the world." ¶ First is the cost of a ticket. Second is the cost to the environment. ¶ Here are the questions you must ask yourself before you decide whether your trip is a no or a go in 2020.

Cost of a ticket, Part 1

Let's say I want to fly to Melbourne, Fla., which is a smaller airport that's much more convenient than Orlando for many resort areas on the eastern coast. I would leave Feb. 3, a Monday, and return Feb. 10, also a Monday.

I held my breath and found a fare of $202.

I would have purchased it but for two things: It had flight times of almost 15 hours there and almost 21 hours back, and it was a basic economy ticket.

Only you can decide whether your money is worth the extra time, but a 15-hour trip that lands you in Melbourne, Fla., doesn't promise the same rewards as a lengthy trip that lands you in Melbourne, Australia.

Let's say you don't want to spend more time in an airport. The next best fare I found that would not consume my trip with layovers was $94 more, but it was still basic economy.

Basic economy has been the response by legacy airlines (such as United, Delta and American) to ultra-low-cost carriers, including Frontier, Allegiant and Spirit. As tempting as it is to believe that these low-cost carriers nickel and dime you to death, they also give you better fares in many cases if you understand the rules.

The legacy carriers don't play as much hardball as the ultra-lows (they don't charge you to print a boarding pass, for instance), but even with a legacy basic fare, you don't get as many opportunities to ensure your well-being. You don't get to choose your seats in advance, and you'll lose your fare if you can't make the trip.

On the other hand, said Seth Kaplan, a longtime transportation analyst, you get the same seatback entertainment, you get a carry-on bag for free (on American and Delta, not on United) and maybe even a snack. That's why he and his family took a basic economy flight from the Washington, D.C., area to Montana, saving them about $200. The fact that you can't choose your seat in advance? "As a family, we almost always get seated together," he said.

Would I pay $366 to fly to Melbourne, Fla., or I would I choose the $296 with a better schedule but still a basic fare?

The question you need to ask yourself: What's my pain point? Identify it and choose accordingly.

Cost of a ticket, Part 2

As the year began, fuel prices were relatively stable and had been for some time. Then trouble erupted in the Middle East and fuel prices shot up overnight. Then they settled back down.

It's important to keep a watch on those prices. As Tom Spagnola, senior vice president of supplier relations for fare website CheapOair, has told me more than once, about 25% of the cost of a ticket is the cost of jet fuel.

The International Air Transport Assn., an airline industry group, makes it easy for you to keep track. Check out its Jet Fuel Price Monitor at *bit.ly/jetfuelmonitor*.

If you begin to see a steady, consistent increase, it's best to buy now because it takes four to six months for those prices to cycle into the cost of a ticket, Kaplan and Spagnola said. "It's not as though you can just introduce a price change the next day," Kaplan said.

The question you need to ask yourself: How is my risk tolerance? Do I dare buy a ticket this far out? Should I buy travel insurance?

Cost to the environment

Here's great news for the airlines, courtesy of Spagnola: Nearly 4.75 billion passenger trips are expected worldwide this year. That would be a record, and an increase of 137% since 2004.

That's not necessarily great news for the environment. Although the airline industry isn't the leading offender, it's the growth in emissions from air travel that are at issue, William Wilkes wrote in a March Bloomberg article.

"All of these forecasts are terrifying climate scientists and activists who say increasing concentrations of greenhouse gases are leading to rising temperatures, more extreme weather and higher death tolls from natural disasters caused at least in part by human activity," Wilkes wrote.

He then quoted Paul Fennel, a professor of clean energy at Imperial College in London, as saying, "We are all going to have to reduce the extent to which we fly."

Enter flight shaming, which means you are wringing your hands over your carbon footprint and deciding perhaps you won't take that trip.

The idea has been gaining momentum since about 2017 and may be having an effect, according to the BBC. Domestic travel dropped 4% in Sweden in 2019, which the BBC cites as the country of origin for *flygskam*, or flight shaming.

In July, KLM asked people to reduce their air travel, suggesting train travel in its place.

That's a concept that works in the Netherlands and most of Europe a little better than it does in the United States. You can get to Paris from London (about 300 miles) by EuroStar in a little more than two hours. If you took Amtrak's Coast Starlight from L.A. to San Francisco (about 380 miles), you could leave L.A. at 10:10 a.m. and get to San Francisco about 10:30 p.m., with the last of the trip by bus.

It's not just that we don't have high-speed trains; it's the distances you must cover in this country if you're headed for points east.

If you fly, several airlines let you buy carbon offsets, including Delta, United and JetBlue.

Or you could plant trees. In a study, 1st Move International calculated how many trees you would need to plant to mitigate a trip from the United Kingdom to various places, then recalculated for LAX: to New York City (seven), to Tokyo (15), to London (16) and to Bangkok, Thailand (23).

Should you fly? Not fly? Kaplan notes that even if you're not on that flight, it will take off anyway — at least for now.

Until we have clean-air jets, this is going to be an increasingly large issue.

The question you need to ask yourself: Can I live with myself if I go? As a traveler, can I live with myself if I don't?

Have a travel dilemma, question or concern? Write to travel@latimes.com. We regret we cannot answer every inquiry.

GEO QUIZ

The Shan and the Karen are the two largest ethnic minorities in which Southeast Asian country?

- ☐ Laos
- ☐ Thailand
- ☐ Myanmar

Answer below. Source: National Geographic Bee

TOURS & CRUISES

MEXICO and GUATEMALA

Into the world of the Maya

Experience southern Mexico on a 10-day jungle river trip on the Rio Usumacinta, which has ruins of the Maya civilization tucked along its banks. Participants will float on the river, watch for wildlife and camp at the Maya cities of Yaxchilán, Mexico, and Piedras Negras, Guatemala, with a full day of exploration at each. The last several days include Class II and III whitewater rapids navigating the narrow San José and San Josecito canyons.

Dates: Feb. 19-28, March 6-15

Price: $2,100 per person, double occupancy; $200 single supplement. Includes hotel accommodations in Villahermosa and Palenque, Mexico; tents; all meals on the river; rafting and safety gear; and professional guides. International airfare not included.

Info: Far Flung Adventures, (800) 359-2627, *farflung.com/rio-usumacinta*

— Anne Harnagel

IDAHO

Backcountry fun

Add a little adventure to your life with an off-the-grid snowmobiling excursion in the backcountry near McCall, Idaho, a resort town known for its skiing and snowmobile terrain. The guided tour, which includes a picnic and a soak in the mineral waters of Burgdorf Hot Springs, is part of a two-night mini-vacation at Shore Lodge Resort in McCall, 100 miles north of Boise. Spa treatments and dinner are included.

Dates: Winter months

Price: From $2,750 for two for a two-night stay. Includes snowmobile rentals, some meals, activities and dinner at the Narrows Steakhouse.

Info: Shore Lodge Resort, (800) 657-6464, *shorelodge.com*

— Rosemary McClure

PANAMA CANAL

From sea to sea

Spend a week exploring the region on a new Pearl Seas Cruises itinerary that travels the length of the Panama Canal. The cruise makes port stops in Cartagena, Colombia, and Panama's San Blas Islands, Gatún Lake, Panama City and Las Perlas Archipelago, known for the island of Contadora, a popular tourist destination The cruise begins in Cartagena or Panama City, where participants can explore the Casco Viejo, the old city, built in the 1670s.

Dates: Cruises begin Dec. 1.

Prices: From $4,675 per person, double occupancy. Includes accommodations aboard the Pearl Mist, an all-balcony ship that holds 210 passengers, as well as meals and activities.

Info: Pearl Seas Cruises, (800) 981-9146, *bit.ly/panamacanalcruise*

— Rosemary McClure

GEO QUIZ ANSWER:

Myanmar