

Persistence gets our money back

Covid-19 has revealed a lot about the way the world functions, nowhere more so than in the travel industry.

Not New Zealand's, which I'm not in a position to judge; I'm referring to the United Kingdom, which was where Lin and I were headed at the end of this month for what I barely cleverly called "the graveyard tour of Britain".

We were going to look for signs of ancestry in what our parents called "the home countries".

Our timing couldn't have been worse when we made bookings in early February, paying all or half the various costs of travel by air and ferry and accommodation in hotels, apartments and homes.

I've now spent twice the length of the trip - six weeks and growing - trying to get the money back, a total around \$10,000.

You'll be surprised to know how much persistence pays off, because we've recovered about 85 percent, which is something of a tribute to the integrity of the business. Or perhaps to the rules; it's a toss-up.

The Americans were the key. Even though we were stopping at Los Angeles for a only few hours so the AirNZ plane could refuel, they have this odd and wonderful rule that meant our airline had to fully refund our fares.

Even then, it wasn't easy. As I sometimes do when I research a column, when I made my first approach to AirNZ I started off not identifying myself as a journalist because I wanted to see how "ordinary" citizens were being treated.

Not well, I'm afraid. Endless delays and excuses led nowhere.

Then (also as I always do for the obvious ethical reasons) I said what I do for a living, and predictably everything changed. We got the refund of nearly \$7000 within hours. Make of that what you will.

The UK wasn't so easy. Nearly all of our UK travel suppliers belong to large organisations, like AirBnB and Booking.com, who leave it to property owners to front up to clients.

They also have "no press" policies. Contacting the agencies for comment proved impossible, even though I made it clear I wanted something from them that I could publish.

Negotiating with accommodation owners had a wide variety of outcomes. Most were reasonable and agreed to give all or part of our money back, even though they didn't actually have it in the first place (the agencies hold on to your money until you turn up).

Owners are allowed to take any approach they like, so we needed to make a special plea that we weren't keen on credits, given that at our age there's no guarantee we'll ever make the trip.

Our first refund came from Northern Ireland. David in Londonderry sent us back the full amount early in the piece when he decided to renovate Erin Cottage while COVID reigns.

Mary at Inneskillen in Northern Ireland deserves a mention. Her AirBnB website said no refunds, but she relented. So did Anthony in Belfast city centre, and Alastair in Finnieston, Glasgow.

StenaLine ferries repaid us without protest for our aborted trip from Belfast to Scotland. A Booking.com property in Woolwich, London, refunded more than \$1200 in an instant.

Three have held out. Jury's Inn hotel in Belfast offers credits only, although negotiations continue. My ever-strident appeals continue to be met with automated email replies, but Gurmeet has responded in the past, so I'll keep on at him.

Easyjet - or HardJet, as I've renamed them - won't give us any of \$211 we paid to fly from Bristol to Belfast. We're a budget airline, they say. So what, I say - I'm a budget traveller.

The third instance is in (where else) Scotland. We sent Mark in Edinburgh a half payment of \$485, but he insists he can't afford to refund anything.

He's AirBnB, who contacted me yesterday from France to say anyone who booked before March and cancelled before August gets no refund...but I don't have to pay the other half. What!

Does all this amount to condemnation of large travel organisations? Not really. For whatever reasons, we got most of our money back. AirNZ doesn't emerge with much credit, but the bulk of the UK travel industry does.

The New Zealand tourism trade needs to think ahead when it deals with postponing customers. Travel will get back to some sort of normality, eventually. Perhaps.