

The 16-month honeymoon by Sally Haywood

Where did you go on your honeymoon? Got any good stories to tell? We intended to go to Malaysia and the Far East on ours but instead, we went to Texas!

Richard and I actually met through a travel magazine. I had advertised for two travel companions, based in Scotland so we could get to know each other, as I had decided on my previous trip from London to Nepal that three was a good number. There is always company if you want it but the other two can amuse themselves if you want to go off and explore on your own, as I often like to do.

Richard replied from a hospital in Southampton, where he was recovering from a foot operation. Fast forward a few months, we were engaged with a wedding date arranged. Richard then said that he and his brother had bought a small plane in Texas as they both had a life-long dream to qualify as pilots. He suggested going there for the 6 months needed to do his licence and he promised he'd be back for the wedding! I was happy for him to do the flying but not the being-away part so I suggested we had the wedding first and then went out together to do the flying bit.

As it didn't make sense – especially financially – to go to the Far East first, we honeymooned in the US. I was so proud of Richard as he drove our 26-foot motorhome along the terrifying 8-lane motorways of L.A. but then he had driven a tank in the Army.

We explored a bit of California, having a great adventure, but, in San Francisco, we got back to the motorhome after a little stroll along Fisherman's Wharf to find we'd been robbed. Our suitcases of clothes were taken plus personal letters and lots more. What they didn't take was the cheap plastic bag which happened to contain our passports, cash and travellers' cheques! We went out to celebrate that small mercy that evening – and managed to leave the cheap plastic bag with all its contents under the bar stool! We raced back, discussing who had had it last to find it propped up behind the bar – marital crisis averted!

We had fun in Vegas, saw the cowboys in Tombstone and had a flying visit to the Grand Canyon, finally making our way to our new home in Texas.

Only to find that the town we'd chosen was a "dry" town – which meant no alcohol but beer seems to not count!

Richard passed his private pilot's licence in a short time and went on to train for the Commercial Pilot's Licence. As part of that, he needed to fly 1000 hours and he did. He went off to see Graceland with another pilot and he flew all the way to New York and over Niagara Falls. Occasionally, I'd go with him. My first flight was to Louisiana to visit my sister and her family. We immediately flew into a thunderstorm and zero visibility. I put my blind faith in my new husband knowing what he was doing – only to find out afterwards that it was a bit of a mistake, that he shouldn't have flown in those conditions and he had been a tad concerned!

Another time, I flew with Richard and another trainee pilot – who, by pure coincidence, shared the same name and surname (with slightly different spelling). We went to Las Vegas again. Sitting on the parcel shelf at the back was not a lot of fun for me but this guy was paying for his hours so needs must! We had a ball in Las Vegas. Free drinks all the time as part of the package we had bought in a Sunday paper and, because I was sitting at the blackjack tables, the other Richard used my free drinks tokens and they had a fine old time. Being prudent gamblers, we won back the same amount as our trip has cost and I closed my eyes when the two slightly worse-for-wear pilots tried to nudge the plane over the mountains as we took off from McCarran Airport!

We regularly had Indian trainee pilots rent out the plane to help with the costs and they did the silliest things. Like when you had to wear a sort of hood when learning to fly with instruments so that they could only look at the instruments and the other pilot would do the visual looking around. Except that one day both pilots said they were “under the hood” and narrowly averted a crash. 10 years later, in the aftermath of 9/11, none of this would have been allowed. (Although it has just been reported this weekend that a large number of Pakistani pilots are flying on fake licences).

Normally, you are only allowed a one-year visa to the States but Richard still had to do a bit more work to qualify. I took a punt, bought one-way tickets for 4 months’ later, making it 16 months in all and applied for a visa extension which was accepted.

I filled my time there helping out making children’s books, selling advertising on a parenting magazine and learning t’ai chi and we saw as much as we could, with Downtown Fort Worth and San Antonio being the Texas favourites.

We flew home on Christmas Day from Florida, sunbathing on the airport roof while waiting to depart. Given the date, the plane was nearly empty so we got superb service and freebies all the way home.

A lovely adventure and a great way to start married life. Next stop – South Africa.