

# Harrowing Travel Tales from the 2008 CRA Meeting in Mont Tremblant!

Summer weather finally surrounds us—a far stretch from what it was like just a few months back. Canadian winters are harsh, but this past winter can definitely be coined as “extreme,” and one that will certainly go down in the history books! Traveling in winter weather can certainly be a challenge and that is why we asked our CRA members to share some trials and tribulations of their journey to and from this year’s Mont Tremblant meeting. Here are the winners...Enjoy!

## 1st Place: An Adventure in Rheumatology

*By Philip Baer, MD, FRCPC and Erica Weinberg, MD*

We were particularly excited to attend this year’s CRA meeting in Mont Tremblant. Erica was invited to present a workshop on pain management, and we had a poster accepted on the same subject. However, “getting there is half the fun” is not how we would describe our experiences traveling from Toronto to Tremblant this year.

Leaving Toronto early on March 5th, we knew a winter storm was expected overnight. We cancelled our original plan to drive to Pearson airport in favor of arranging a taxi. The taxi arrived 15 minutes late, delayed by the bad weather. That was fine, as it gave us added time to shovel out the driveway, which we had begun at 4:30 am. When we arrived at Pearson airport it was no surprise to find our flight delayed due to weather conditions—luckily, we reached Montreal only two hours late. We had a driver patiently waiting for us who showed us how it’s done in Quebec—driving in bad conditions at, or above the speed limit, not wearing a seatbelt, steering with one hand and chatting on a cell phone with the other! Despite this, we arrived safely at Mont Tremblant in one piece and in time for lunch and the start of the meeting as planned.

The actual meeting was excellent in all aspects—scientific and social. Of course, the weather reports were not favorable for the return home on Saturday. “Big winter storm with 36 to 48 hours of continuous snow” was the forecast, spanning the whole weekend. Other wiser people decided to leave early, but we wanted to attend the Saturday morning sessions, and we already had a 1 pm shuttle booked. While waiting for that, we checked the internet: good news, multiple Toronto-bound flights were cancelled, but our 11 pm flight was still listed as on time. Meanwhile, other attendees heading out West were finding out their flights had been cancelled as well.

The drive back to Montreal airport was uneventful, but the snow and wind picked up as we arrived just before 3 pm. While trying to check in at the automated kiosk, we were rejected and told to see a ticket agent. Bad news, our 11 pm flight was cancelled as well. We were rebooked on the 8 pm flight, making our planned trip into Montreal to meet relatives for dinner out of the question.

The gate area was unusually quiet, as numerous inbound and outbound flights had been cancelled. Our flight was delayed to 9 pm, then 10 pm, and then cancelled altogether. We could see why—the view outside was of blinding snow, blown around by high winds. We met other CRA attendees enduring the same fate.

Hundreds of people were stranded around us—sprawled across chairs, lying on baggage trays and even on the floor. One lucky couple had an air mattress. Air Canada offered a discounted price on a hotel in downtown Montreal, which was impossible to access. All of the hotels close to the airport were sold out, and their airport shuttles weren’t running anyway. We found two benches in an upstairs alcove, and tried to sleep, unsuccessfully, even with our Air Canada issued blankets and pillows and some chemical help.

We were up again at 3:30 am to line up for our rescheduled flight at 5:30 am Sunday. The ticket agent had to clear away people sleeping on the baggage weigh scales to process us. Bad news again—our 5:30 am flight was cancelled, so we were rebooked on the 3 pm flight leaving Sunday. More fast food, and more stories swapped with other rheumatologists and stranded travelers. We met a couple who lived in Montreal and had arrived home the night before. They had spent five hours getting from the runway to the gate to disembark, then couldn’t get transportation home and had to stay overnight at the airport as well.

The hours passed, and it was time to approach the gate for our 3 pm flight home. The noon flight, which we had been unable to get seats on, was already delayed to 4 pm! (The 2 pm flight, which was also full, had been cancelled). At the gate, with a clear view out the window, we could see that our plane wasn't in evidence. Over the PA system they told us that our plane was at another gate, but snowed in. One hour later, our plane arrived. The next delay was fuelling the plane—the gas cap was frozen shut! We left three hours late, after spending 27 hours at the Montreal airport. The drive home was uneventful, leaving us where we had started—shoveling out the driveway to get back into our house!

Meanwhile, our inbox had been filling up with other travel horror stories. Some other highlights: “We circled over Pearson in a holding pattern for about one hour, started running out of gas and did not receive clearance to land and had to be rerouted to Sudbury!” and “We were not more than five minutes outside of Tremblant, when a couple of deer jumped over a snow drift out of nowhere, with one of them hitting the driver's side of our vehicle. We are both fine and the car will be going into the shop this week. Interestingly enough, it was the weather and bad driving conditions that we were concerned with at the time. The last thing we were thinking about was the possibility of hitting a deer!”

We're happy to be home, and glad we have a year to recover before contemplating getting to and from Kananaskis for the CRA meeting in 2009.

## 2nd Place: The Montreal Saga

By Arthur A.M. Bookman, MD, FRCPC

I would prefer not to be in a position to write this saga, but it seems that Montreal and I do not mix well in the winter time. Having experienced disastrous trips to Montreal in the past, I decided to be smart this time. I purchased first class, refundable train tickets to use in case our airplane was cancelled.

With the storm beginning to rage at the Pierre Trudeau Airport, Air Canada assured us that there would be no problem. For good measure, they forced us to check through our carry-ons because of a 0.5 cm size discrepancy. I cancelled my train tickets, and indeed the plane took off 30 minutes late, and we settled in. At Pearson Airport, the pilot apparently was having the same panic reaction as everyone else in the plane as we bounced to Kingdom Come, and he decided that he had better return



Photograph by: Dr. Humaid Al Wahshi

to Montreal. At Pierre Trudeau Airport however, the news was the same. After announcing that we could not land, there was silence while I considered how out of date my will was, and wondered if we could refuel in mid-air like a World War II jet. We were told that we were to go to North Bay to wait out the storm.

We did in fact land in North Bay, I think—there *were* two announcements welcoming us! One and a half hours was spent waiting on the tarmac, one hour in the air returning to Toronto (our original destination), one hour on the tarmac in Toronto waiting for the ground crew, another hour waiting for our cursed luggage, and yet an additional hour waiting for a cab! A 55-minute trip took nine hours. I could have, and I guess I should have, taken the train!

## 3rd Place: A Very Long Day

By Vivian Bykerk, MD, FRCPC

Getting back home after the CRA meeting, my “fast” train ride to Toronto was cancelled and the noon flight that I had scheduled as an alternative was delayed until 9 pm. The milk run train I was able to get on was four hours late and took us eight hours to reach Toronto (from Montreal) because of frozen switches and only one track being open (Siberia has a a better rail system!). I missed my direct flight to Arizona having arrived home just in time for it to take off. After spending 13 hours in travel (remember, this is from Montreal to Toronto) I got to spend another lovely 17 hours (a total of four flights) the next day traveling to Arizona to visit my family for March Break. Though I must admit, this is a “good news” story because it ended in five days of sunshine, something we Torontonians hadn't seen since October 2007!