



Entry Visas Are Not A Right

Yachties often think that merely showing up somewhere is good enough...a visa on arrival will be issued. Well, usually this is so; sometimes it isn't. A short while ago our daughter wrote asking whether the SARS epidemic was causing us any problems. It wasn't and we so responded. Well, that all changed with a recent day trip from Seban Cove (Malaysia) to Singapore.

It has been less hassle for us to enter Malaysia than the USA or even Canada. However, we had heard that there were now immigration problems for Canadians. Therefore, we immediately went to the immigration desk and asked if we would be allowed to re-enter. The answer shocked us, "Not without a visa from the Malaysian High Commission in Singapore." We nearly aborted the trip, until the immigration official confirmed that a visa was easy to get.

We were not surprised when the officials sent an inbound Canadian family back to Singapore, as they had no visas. However, alarm bells went off in our head on the trip to Singapore, when we learned that the Malaysian High Commission had advised them that Canadians do not need a visa. If we could not get a visa in Singapore, we might not be allowed back to our floating home!

We telephoned the Malaysian High Commission, getting the usual, dial-1 if...dial-2 if..., none of which fit our circumstances. Of course, dialling zero did not result in the proffered human being responding, despite a dozen tries. Upon arrival in Singapore, we immediately went to the Malaysian High Commission, where we were assured that Canadians do not need a visa. We asked for something in writing but they refused, stating that a letter from a doctor would suffice. We obtained the letter, and went about our errands, returning to the ferry terminal burdened with bags of meat, fruit and veggies, but not with any fear of being refused re-entry.

Upon returning to Sabana Cove, the same immigration officer, seeing no visas in our passports he exclaimed, "Alamak!", the universal Bahasa word that substitutes for most of our swear words. We produced our trump, the Doctor's Letter. He refused to accept it! At first, they were determined to send us back to Singapore, and kept the ferry from departing for this reason. For the next hour or so, we argued our case, our most powerful argument being that the High Commission in Singapore probably received their mail from Immigration HQ before an outpost such as Seban Cove.

Fortunately, common sense eventually prevailed. Although they would not clear us into Malaysia, they offered that we could stay on our boat, in quarantine as it were; the next day they would check with their HQ. The quid pro quo for this offer was that we had to agree to leave Malaysia immediately, boat and all, should the HQ require us to have a visa. The immigration officer would come to the boat the next day between 10 and 11 and let us know our fate.

The next day, Channel News Asia and the local newspapers carried articles stating that Canadians, and a few other nationalities, do not require visas. Nevertheless, the immigration officer did not show and we remained in limbo, most of the day. In a small way, we know how refugees must feel, not being officially in any country and not being allowed to go anywhere. Eventually the Immigration Officer

received his instructions from HQ, whereupon he sent a messenger with an apology and granted us access.