

# ★ EURA The EuRApean

## Palma 2010 - The Full Story of the Conference that Never Was Dominic Tidey, EuRA

*I was keeping a diary of events on my Blackberry as we drove and then once we arrived in Palma. Here are those notes.*

### Wednesday 14<sup>th</sup> April



*35 Boxes of Conference materials on their way to Palma*

The very last of the packing has been picked up by Fedex – this is always the last big deadline for us, to have all of the check in envelopes, badges, delegate lists and final materials leave the office. The vast majority of the conference was shipped by TEAM three weeks ago and is now in their warehouse in Palma. I will sleep better when I know that the Fedex has arrived – that is the really un-recreatable stuff. I have printed a complete copy set of badges to carry on the 'plane in hand luggage just in case! I know that everything will arrive and I'm being pessimistic, but it's actually quite useful anyway to have the spares as it's easy to lose a badge, or if delegates leave them in their hotel and if they're not staying in the Gran Melia, it's much easier for us to have a ready printed replacement. It's taken this week and the weekend to get the check in envelopes packed and my back is really sore from working that production line!

So it's all systems go and Linda, Maria and Diane are all really excited now. Tad and I fly out Saturday. Just want to get there and get on with it.

### Thursday 15<sup>th</sup> April

09:00 - Fedex seem to have messed up – the lead box on the consignment has been sent from Stansted so is on the 'plane, but the other 7 boxes appear to be in Bishops Stortford. Will ring the Gran Melia and ask if they've arrived.

Diane has just come in and said something about an unpronounceable volcano going off in Iceland... apparently they are talking about closing the airports! Still we're not flying until Saturday but I have just looked at the cost of getting to France with the car on the channel tunnel... will ring Tad and see what he thinks.

10:30 - Tad thinks I'm overreacting, but now the BBC are saying the airports in Scotland will close this afternoon. Have rung him back and he agrees we should buy the crossing anyway just in case – it's only €150 and we have to be in Palma to set up at the very latest on Sunday. It's no problem for the girls as they don't fly out until Tuesday.

12:00 - Just seen the BBC website again – all the airports are now closed including Heathrow – this is ridiculous! Masses of people are now stuck wondering how many hours they'll be delayed – I don't think all the airports even closed over 9/11, but maybe they did.

18:30 - OK now I'm starting to worry – it's 18:30 and the airports are still closed. I'm sure everything will be OK by Saturday morning but what if our 'plane isn't at Stansted? We could wait but I'm looking now into how much it will cost to get to Palma from Barcelona.

22:30 – The news on the BBC is looking very bad now.., this volcano has pushed a huge cloud into the sky and it's now drifting right across the UK. France and Belgium are now talking about closing their airspace and the cloud is really bad over the Nordic region – Denmark and Sweden are now closed. This is beyond a joke – I'm booking that ferry to Palma and we'll leave first thing in the morning by car.

### Friday 16<sup>th</sup> April

08:30 - In the car now driving to the channel tunnel. The crossing on the ferry to Palma cost €750! Tad is going to kill me if our flight goes tomorrow – it would be just ironic if we're half way through France in the morning and the flight goes and we're not on it.



13:00 - Channel Tunnel – it's really busy here but the very helpful woman on check in has got us onto earlier crossing which is great as we can get further through France before we have to stop.

# ★ EURA The EuRApean

16:00 - France – driving via Reims and Dijon to avoid Paris – neither of us can cope with the Peripherique on a Friday evening rush hour on a French holiday weekend. Google Earth directions say it is only another 45 minutes on top of the journey to Barcelona. It estimates our journey all the way down to take about 13 hours. Still one good thing, Vanessa at the Gran Melia has confirmed that 8 Fedex boxes have arrived!

23:00 Dijon – Stopped at a roadside motel. Picked up some sandwiches when we got petrol so a quick glass of wine in the bar and then sleep. Tad has driven all the way so far so I'll take the first shift in the morning. Really pleased we got this far down – not such a rush tomorrow – just 9 hours to go.

## **Saturday 17<sup>th</sup> April**

08:00 - Up early and on the road. What would we do without a Blackberry! Have phoned everyone on the council and told them we're driving. The news is terrible... no flights now across the whole of northern Europe and our flight from Stansted has just been cancelled. We are very glad we got in the car... we have to be in Palma whatever happens. Now I'm panicking about the ferry being mobbed and that we won't get there in time! We spoke to Nathalie Bourdin Gazal who said to be aware that this is a holiday weekend in France and everyone will be aiming for the Alps and Pyrenees to get a last ski weekend in before Spring. It was so quiet on the roads getting to Dijon, but it's getting busier as we go south.

13:00 - Just stopped at Lyons to get petrol and a sandwich. The sun is out and it's a beautiful warm day... and this is a lovely city – even though we're only seeing the motorway, it's right by the river. Keep thinking how cool it would be to call local members and drop in to say Hi! Dominique Berthou is here and it seems such a wasted opportunity to see her – still she'll be in Palma next week. Traffic really heavy now... We have to make it to that ferry. Just went online on the Blackberry to find out where we go when we get to Barcelona but there is absolutely no information whatsoever! Really frustrating as the TomTom has 3 options for the port and I have no idea which one is the one for Palma.



*Waiting for the Barcelona to Palma Ferry*

16:00 – Just crossed into Spain – drove along the coast motorway and I really wanted to just stop and see something of the Languedoc, but not on this trip! Having looked at the BBC web and talked to various people, this situation is not likely to get any better. We had a call from Liz Paavolainen in Finland who was due to fly to Palma today. Her flight is cancelled and the hotel are sticking with their 72 hour cancellation policy! Just spoke with Vanessa Salom, our conference director at the Gran Melia and she has assured us this will not happen in the circumstances which is great. Have arranged a meeting for 9am tomorrow with the management team. Tad pulled the contracts out of the boot of the car and we've spent the last two hours reading the small print. We made the final total payments for the event at the start of this week in line with the contract, and they are legally entitled to keep all the money. I'm now feeling nauseous and we're not even on the boat.

18:00 – Have just pulled up in front of the Grand Marina Hotel at the end of the port jetty in Barcelona to ask the doormen where we go for the Palma ferry – they don't know but have extremely kindly let us leave the car (with all our worldly goods and laptops etc) and we're off to find the office.

20:00 – I've just come back to the hotel to ask if the doormen will continue to look after the car. Suddenly thought they might think our extended absence would look like a security risk! Tad is still in the queue to get our boarding passes. TWO HOURS so far as Rome has now closed its airport and apparently a big football match has left thousands of Italians stranded. They're all trying to get on the Civitavecchia crossing tonight. We already have our tickets but there is nowhere you can go to just collect a boarding pass – we have to wait with 3000 people trying to buy tickets.

21:30 – Finally in the car compound waiting to drive onto the ferry. There is a real spirit here – people are saying that this situation is going to get worse. The ferry isn't full, but the ferries coming from Palma are full to capacity with people trying to get to the mainland to get trains to the rest of Europe.

## **Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> April**

06:00 – We have just got off the boat and it's dark in Palma. Crossing was smooth and we managed to get some sleep but we both feel like crap and look like the homeless. Meeting with the hotel management team at 09:00

10:00 – The Gran Melia have initially told us that they will only charge for the delegates who are able to get here. However, the rest they would hold against a future event. This isn't great news as we would have to hold two

# ★ EURA The EuRApean

conferences here. But it's a start and they have agreed not to charge anyone for room cancellation if they write and let them know. This is very, very good of them. Have been in touch with the council and they all feel that at this stage that if we cancel the conference, we have to do it before people start trying to travel and start getting stuck. We already know of so many people who are now stranded across the world trying to get here or trying to get back from the Fidi conference in Australia. Our Audio Visual director, Mini, is stuck in Hong Kong, but luckily his colleagues Luke and John are in the UK and are driving here with all the kit on Monday. So we have an ethical responsibility now to cancel the event so that we can stop people from having to travel in such an incredibly uncertain climate, but may lose everything if we do.



*On arrival at the Gran Meliá, still hopeful*

12:00 – I've just spoken with several delegates who are very concerned and want to know if we are going ahead. Tad has spoken with everyone on the council to arrange a conference call tomorrow, Monday at 14:00 to make final decisions about going ahead. I've just amended the website to say that we are going ahead but will make a final decision by 17:00 tomorrow if the situation does not improve. I've also just spoken with John Potter, our primary trainer for Thursday, who is a consultant to the military. He is very concerned about this volcano and that the eruption could go on for a while longer yet. He is trying to make plans to get here by road, if he cannot fly. He was meant to arrive today but his flight has been cancelled. I've said that if he cannot fly, we'll try and arrange for the session to go ahead via a teleconference, but if he can't get here, will anyone?

14:00 – We've just been through the accommodation lists of each hotel to check on anyone who is meant to be arriving today. Everyone so far has cancelled except for Gerri Bertolasi from the US. Have just emailed her to check where and

how she is and she just called to say she is stuck in Madrid but will continue to try get to Mallorca. I did say that there is a chance that if things don't improve she may be here with just Tad and I!

15:00 – We've just spoken with the Gran Meliá again and they have said that in the event we have to cancel, they will not charge us on the condition that we leave the money with them until next year. They have been so kind, so understanding and are taking a huge financial hit that they don't have to, on our behalf. We have been in contact with Barbara Formosa of the events management company in charge of the Gala Diner and Party Night and she is trying to contact the venue owners but it's Sunday and they are not reachable.

16:00 – Just had a call from Klara Foti from Hungary who is here having arrived last Wednesday for a few days holiday. She is very concerned about not being able to leave. We went to her hotel and had a coffee and assured her we will do whatever we can – although at the moment, this is precious little.

20:00 – Have spent the last hours working out all of the finances and trying to contact all of our speakers. At this point, even if we do go ahead, no one will be here. Everyone is being so supportive.

22:00 – I have just spoken with Sylvia Ehrlich, one of our speakers, who is devastated but just cannot take the risk of coming over from the US and has cancelled her flight. She is entirely right to do this and many, many others have now done the same.

## **Monday 19<sup>th</sup> April**

07:00 – The situation has got worse. All airspace is now closed in the north and the Spanish authorities are now intermittently closing their airspace. We know that people start to arrive today for partner meetings and a few days of R&R in lovely Palma. The rooming lists show that both hotels would start to fill up today and we are contacting people to find out what they are doing. There are currently 25,000 people stranded in Palma airport.

08:00 – Barbara Formosa from Bellver events has just met with us. She has been in charge of the two venues for the Gala Dinner and the Party Night. Tad and she and the venue owners are in negotiations and this is the final piece of the puzzle – if we are to go ahead and cancel, which looks increasingly likely, we need their agreement to do the same thing as the Gran Meliá and hold the event over until next year.

10:00 – Have just phoned every council member to let them know that Barbara has done the unbelievable and has persuaded the two venues to hold the event over to next year – we will pay something to the Gala Dinner venue as they have already bought perishables which are on ice, such as meat and flowers, but this is OK. We have brought the conference call forward to 10:30 and will now have to make the unthinkable decision.... Do we go ahead, or do we pull the plug?

10:50 – The council unanimously voted to cancel the event. They too have been in touch with people all over the world who cannot get here. We all feel that even if

# ★ EURA The EuRApean

the situation improves later in the week, the media are saying it will take days to clear the backlog of stranded people. Tad and I are devastated as are the council. This has been the saddest day of my career. I am about to post the notice on the website and the girls in the office and Tad and I will begin calling everyone.

12:30 – The email has reached the world and the response has been unbelievable. We have had 300 return emails of support, concern and encouragement. We have spoken to every sponsor and exhibitor and they have all agreed to hold their sponsorships over to 2011. This is just incredible support. We have both had moments of emotion over this. Now we have to ensure that everyone has been told and the office are calling every company individually. The girls are so sad not to be able to welcome everyone to the event.

18:00 – Today has passed in a blur and I have not yet had the chance to take in what's happened. We have cancelled the conference. It's like a bereavement. Have been on the phone all day and spent the last three hours trying to reply individually to everyone who has sent emails of support. We want people to know what these acts of kindness mean to us and how overwhelmed we are by them.

23:00 – Sitting on the balcony watching the ships leave the harbour and feeling very down.

## Tuesday 20<sup>th</sup> April

08:30 – In the conference office trying to sort out all of the stuff. We have 40 packing crates shipped in by TEAM plus all of the materials and stands for the exhibitors piled as high as a small volcano. However, no FEDEX! The eight boxes turned out to belong to one of the exhibitors. Though that worry is now irrelevant. Of course nothing can move by air. The concierge just brought the English language newspaper to us with the headline "Expats move to help airport stranded". There are still over 25,000 people stranded here. All the ferries are fully booked into next week and many people are literally on the floor of the airport. So now we begin the task of opening everything up. We are hoping to be able to store everything in Mallorca until next year. Tad is talking to Jacqueline Biersma at TEAM to see what they can do.

16:00 – Everything is opened, sorted and repacked and ready to ship to the secure storage facility here in Palma. The guys will come in the next two hours. This is surreal – it really is over.

18:00 – Messages continue to pour in, and some of them have brought a lump to our throats. We are saving them all. Now we have to go through all of the finances and work out what we do. We know that we cannot refund delegates as we do not have their money – it is on deposit with our venues. However we think we can credit back the vast majority without affecting our operations for the coming year but that has yet to be worked out. It is not something we ever thought we would have to do. We know we have substantial costs that have already been paid out, plus all sorts of other stuff.



*Disposing of Check In*

## Wednesday April 21<sup>st</sup>



*Throwing away the photo wall*

09:00 – The Fedex has just arrived and just at the moment when we should be handing delegates their check in envelopes and greeting all our old friends and new ones, we throwing it all away. This is another low point in a bad week.

18:00 – A day of sorting and talking and trying to work out exactly where we stand financially. I want to email delegates as soon as we can with a plan so that they know where they stand. We were over at the Palas Atenea earlier asking them if they can intervene with the Sol Melia web bookings office who are sticking to their terms for the pre-paid advance booking rates. Of course anyone who booked through the EuRA codes has been refunded entirely, but anyone through solmelia.com stands to lose out – however, we are hopeful to be able to persuade them to credit against next year instead. As we were coming out of the hotel, we met James Walters and David Hugglestone from

Smith Stone Walters, who came anyway as they are running a team building thing this weekend. Gatwick opened late this afternoon and their flight was running more or less to schedule. However, Palma airport is still a dreadful mess as the airlines try to repatriate 25,000 people.

20:00 – Jane Suter from Kingsdale also made it here! She went to the airport and her flight was going so she just got on for a few days in Palma! We're all meeting for supper tomorrow – the Gala Dinner for 500 will now be in the tapas restaurant

# ★ EURA The EuRApean

by the cathedral, for 6.

## **Thursday April 22<sup>nd</sup>**

12:00 – The weather is dreadful, pouring with rain. Had the event have gone ahead, we would be freaking out about lunch on the terrace and getting people down to the buses to the dinner in monsoon conditions. Still, rather than the heartbreaking sight of a totally empty dining room at breakfast. There should be 450 guests in this hotel, and there are 17. The hotel have lost hundreds of thousands of euros. Spent another day on the phone and emailing with the council and the members. Have arranged for an AGM and reception to take place in Frankfurt in June. Have also arranged to hold another party – the “Return to Palma”, on the Wednesday evening next year in addition to everything else to thank everyone for being so brilliant. It will be a great time to show everyone the amazing view from the harbour terrace and welcome them to one of the best hotels we’ve ever used.

22:00 – I came back after a drink with the Gala Dinner guests as I wanted to get the final draft of the credit email written and the website updated. Also, I’m really tired. Rain has stopped and the harbour is still – feel very flat. We tried to get an earlier crossing to Barcelona tonight but no luck. Also we’ve been told the channel tunnel is a mess with thousands of cars queueing on the motorway not able to access the terminal. And on top of all the chaos, SNCF in France have gone on strike, bringing the European rail network to a standstill.

## **Monday April 26<sup>th</sup>**

15:00 – Just got back to the UK.

The weekend was taken up with travel really. On Friday, we finished the last of the things that needed organising, wrote to the council and for the first time this week, left the hotel to take a walk around Pollença in the north. Jane Suter and Gerri Bertolasi came with us and it was the nicest few hours of the week. We walked them around Pollença old town, and they treated us to a lovely lunch of fresh fish by the harbour in Porto Pollença. The weather matched my mood again – it was overcast, but warm. Spent Saturday packing and sorting before driving to the port to get the ferry to Barcelona. No queues thankfully – but ferry still full of people taking alternative routes home. Got to Barcelona at 07:30 and drove for 12 hours stopping in Reims for the night. We got to the channel tunnel in 3 hours and are now on our way home back in the UK. The traffic seems so heavy compared to the wonderful French motorways.

So now we face the fallout. We have a webex meeting with the council tomorrow at 15:30 and will then send out the notices to delegates with details of their credit for 2011. This is what it all comes down to – we know how supportive the members have been over all of this, but we need their support once again.

Neither Tad nor I could have predicted the bizarre events of the last week – who could? We know that at least everyone is safe, if severely inconvenienced and irritated by the volcano, and for me I am just lost for words at what an overreaction closing the airspace has seemed to have been. So we know how to run a great conference, and now how to cancel one – let’s hope that is a skill that NEVER needs to be put to use again.