

MacKay on money

BY FINANCIAL PLANNER CHRIS MACKAY

I thought our top QCs were well paid until I heard New York Governor Eliot Spitzer was paying \$1,000 per hour for the services of presumably high class call girls. We were discussing this over dinner recently with an Aussie relation, who said she knew someone who used to work as a receptionist for a Melbourne brothel. Well, brothels really. She apparently had two phones on the desk and she answered the calls accordingly. Let's name them "Ladies of the Night Ltd" and "Ladies of the Evening Ltd". The first catered for the lower end of the market. Let's say \$50 per hour and the second for the top end at say \$250 per hour. And guess what? No matter which phone went, the same girl/s went out to do the business.



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A disclosure statement is available on request and free of charge.

Now that's a clever trick I reckon. Sort of like local body rates' policy. Charge the more expensive house heaps more, but for exactly the same services.

Which leads me nicely back to politics, and onwards to the US presidential race. I was thinking of John McCain at 71 being a 50/50 possibility of being the successor to George Bush. If he wins the next one too, he'll knock off at age 79, the same age as my dentist dad retired. Both teenagers though compared to Fidel Castro of Cuba who has just retired in his early 80's.

Seeing as I'm in the "money" business (investments, insurance and KiwiSaver) I'm going to tell you a Cuban insurance story. Travel insurance that is.

My wife Kathryn and I visited Cuba in 2002. We arrived from Cancun in Mexico, despite the fact a day earlier we were in Orlando in Florida just a stone's throw from Havana the capital. But one cannot fly from the States direct to Cuba because of the historical sanctions and restrictions which still exist all these years after the missile crisis and Bay of Pigs debacle, both in the early 1960's.

US/Cuban relations should be getting better but there is conjecture that because of George's brother Jeb Bush's Governorship of Florida, filled with ex Cubans who hate Fidel, the restrictions will continue.

The international airport at Havana was an old hanger with closed cubicles where we queued to go through immigration. We both tried to go through together, like we have in every other country we've visited, but had to go to separate cubicles for a little uncomfortable interrogation as to why we were there in the first place. Once we emerged, customs then questioned us as to why we had full suitcases. Were we going to illegally supply locals with some loot we had purchased in the States? If their shops didn't have a widget in stock, it would be immoral for a local to be given one.

So we felt very welcome (yeah right) and once through picked up our prebooked cab to take us to downtown Havana. Our cab got stopped by Police on the way from the airport. Can't remember why, but it took five or 10 minutes for the driver to allay the cops' fears to get moving again.

On to the beautiful old hotel, the Nacionale, where all the Americans used to stay prior to the revolution in the late 50's, but which needed a lot of TLC now.

First day in Havana. A wander around. Video camera out. All very nice. A leisurely stroll down the waterfront, along

the Malecon, where the architecture was terrific but 90 per cent of the buildings were dilapidated and in need of Terry Serepisos to redevelop them or Bob Jones to spend some money on them to get them back to their former glory. No dough for that in a repressive Communist State. Lots of old 40's and 50's American cars. They were fun.

We had lunch on a hotel rooftop, met some pleasant Russian lawyer guy and his wife who lived in Cuba but were in Havana on vacation.

We thought we'd walk back to our hotel and take in the atmosphere. Kathryn was slightly ahead of me. Some young guy cut in front of me, grabbed Kathryn's gold chain she was wearing round her neck from behind, gave her a shove, broke the chain and ran off with it – all within two seconds probably.

When we realised what had happened, I gave chase, back down the road, down a side street, not for long though before I realised I might end up with a group of knife wielding thugs surrounding me, and Kathryn in possibly a similar predicament. So feeling very violated and Kathryn with a big gouge on the back of her neck, and not trusting anyone now, we trudged back to the hotel. It would have been nicer if it hadn't decided then to rain, but rain it did, torrentially, so we got back to our room absolutely soaked.

After a shower and a time of reflection, we thought we should report this assault and theft to the Police. With help from the hotel's staff, they wrote down in Spanish what had happened. After a visit to the wrong Police station, we ended up at some fortress where cops with jackboots and guns were strutting around. We gave them the note from the hotel. Our passports were then taken from us and with dismay we watched them disappear into some inner office.

Some thug with a high rank marched us into his office, sat us down at a desk facing a windowless wall and then interrogated us while standing behind us suspiciously eyeing the passports that had now found their way to him. Not a good feeling so at this stage I said "Forget it, we'll go back to our hotel." Too late. Three cops and the two of us were sandwiched into a tiny police car, stinking hot, with no air conditioning and no window winders in the back, and driven to the scene of the crime and then on to the Havana Hospital. Straight out of the 50's and not too flash now; although we did get pushed to the front of the queue to have Kathryn's neck seen to. Back to the hotel, now about 9pm where I thanked

them for their assistance and said we'd call it quits now, that we're tired and hungry and have had enough. Sorry, no can do. We needed to provide a statement.

The hotel was absolutely hopeless. Not a cup of coffee or biscuit in sight. Eight hours without anything to eat or drink. The hotel staff did ask the Captain to remove his pistol from his holster as he marched us on through the hotel lobby and to a small room. He complied by sticking the gun down the back of his pants and pulling his shirt out.

I wrote a statement in English of what had happened including when we had arrived in Cuba and what for etc. The Captain had a hotel staff person translate it and then wrote it out laboriously in Spanish and asked me to sign it. I have read too many bad books I think because I had visions of signing a declaration in a foreign language, confessing to be a capitalist spy or drug dealer or money trafficker. I didn't want to but eventually I signed it after cross referencing it to my statement in English and asked him for a photocopy. No. I'd like a copy. No. I want a copy. No. Give me a copy. No. Why not? Official document! OK then, you win. Is that all? Can we go now? Great. Oh yes and thank you so much for making us, the victims, feel like we are the perpetrators of this crime. It's now 11 pm and we're absolutely famished and stuffed. If this is Cuba, we don't like it.

Lessons. Don't be dumb overseas and wear a gold chain despite having worn it for 20 years. Avoid jackbooted cops with guns. Be more streetwise. Be thankful for arranging decent travel insurance. ■

