

The Miracle of Flight

Humorous Meditations of a Frequent Flier

by Mark Friedman

The Miracle of Flight

I take the miracle of flight for granted. I am more interested in the miracle of leg room. What is missing from air travel these days is any sense of comfort. I dream of being able to stretch out and sleep. Instead my knees are jammed into the seat in front of me, which the owner has considerately tilted all the way back. I am sure that this angle of incline is above (or below) the legal limit. But my remedy is not the courts. I intend to kill him¹. First torturing him by kicking the seat and then running him (and the seat) through with a long sword.²

Every person who shuffles slowly along blocking my way is part of a conspiracy to annoy me to death. Travel was supposed to be glamorous, exciting. Instead it is survival in an endless camp of detainees. Airline officials are prison guards in disguise. I am planning a break at midnight from Concourse B, over the wall to freedom. Are you with me?

Freedom of choice

Eventually airline snacks will evolve to become a single peanut in a brightly covered plastic bag and a “perfume strip” which allows you to smell the beverage of your choice. If you register in advance for MCH long distance you will be allowed to purchase a real drink for \$35. On longer flights salt licks will be positioned on the seat back in front of you. And actual water will be provided in a plastic cup in the color of your choice.

The illusion of choice is what the airline industry is all about these days. “Welcome to Chump, Michigan, and thank you for choosing East Southeast Airlines.” What they mean to say is “Thank you for paying too much for a ticket to Chump Michigan at a time when we wanted to go there anyway.” Someday there will be only one airline and it will only go to Chump Michigan. Life will be better.

¹Note to FAA, FBI and ITSA: I am a non-violent person. This is a figure of speech.

²A *plastic* sword which I was able to get through security.

Another on time departure

And then there's the matter of time. An on time flight is a thing of beauty. You want to stand back. Admire it for a while. It is a scientific fact that the only airline employees who actually care if a flight is on time are the cleaning crew. They get to go home and sleep in their own beds. The percent of flights which both leave *and arrive* on time is approaching zero. The airline crew takes great pride in announcing another "on time departure" and then sitting on the runway for an hour and a half while private jets practice take offs and landings.

Then you get to the "airport of your destination"³ and the pilot announces "We'll have to sit here for a few minute. There's another plane at our gate." Well get them the hell out of our gate, or get another gate. Or better: The gate is clear but the jetway operator is temporarily delayed while he finishes the "find a word" puzzle book he's been working on since the 5th grade. I haven't been on an airplane that actually *arrived* on time in months.

I hate fascists. I think they should all be put in concentration camps. But they could get the trains to run on time - probably by putting the late train engineers in concentration camps. Maybe we could take this one tiny lesson from them. I will seriously consider voting for any presidential candidate who promises to get the airlines to run on time.

The terminal from which no planes depart

There are people milling about. And it looks like a real airport terminal. But the only flights are arriving flights. The people waiting for the departing flights are actually paid actors hired by the airline industry. You can tell this because they leave the airport without actually getting on an airplane. Airports take turns hosting the "terminal from which no planes depart." There must be a published schedule but it is known only to Actors' Equity. A production on this scale requires a large number of theater people - stage managers, props, costumes, lighting and of course gaffers and wheezers. Props are particularly important - luggage and cell phones. I am particularly impressed with the intense performance put in by the cell phone actors.

I have often thought I would call their bluff, stand up in the middle of the terminal and shout, "I know what you're up to. You're all actors. This whole thing's a sham." But then I'm sure they would arrange for an actual departure - and not on an airplane.

Small planes

I am actually not afraid of small planes. I figure they have been around longer than big airplanes. And the technology

³Don't you just love the automated voice on the commuter planes that says "Welcome to your destination." The plane's computer has no idea where it is or where you are but it's determined to be damned cheerful about it.

is easier to understand. It's basically the engine of a 1964 VW beetle attached to a set of canoe paddles. Anyone could make one reasonably well as an amateur - and they have experts making them.

My main problem with little planes is the persistent matter of turbulence. This is worse on little planes than on big planes due to the different ratio of airplane size to the size of a molecule of air. So the molecules of air sometimes win out with little planes. I have solved this problem by taking Dramamine on *every* little plane flight. I decided to do this on a flight to LaGuardia where the entire 19 passengers were about to redecorate the interior of the plane when we landed just in time. I later realized that airplane builders, with help of material design chemists, had solved this problem already. The interiors of airplanes already look like they were redecorated by previous passengers.

Terminal illness

The people who design airport terminals should be punished. One way to do this is for them to hold their conventions there and lay down on the concourse and allow us to walk on them. They must be among the most sadistic people on earth. My favorite designs are those that maximize the distance between gates. This is an entire subject of research in terminal design schools.

One feature of every airport is that the commuter gates are a two day hike from the rest of the gates. This is because it is necessary to keep the big planes away from the little planes. The big planes would beat up the little planes and take their lunch money.

Things that could be done to improve specific airport terminals

- Detroit: Make the main concourse longer and narrower. Have giant jack-in-the box puppets jump out at you from the vending stores.
Best feature: moving walkways that force you to cross oncoming pedestrian traffic to get to them. Head-on pedestrian collisions are a great source of amusement for the designers of this airport.
- Los Angeles: Add several more different architectural styles to the walk from the big plane gates to the commuter terminal.
- John Wayne: Allow passengers to dart across traffic rather than hike over and down the other side. Give prizes to the survivors.
- San Diego: Turn the whole thing into an urban park and build an airport where you can't see into apartment

windows during landing.⁴

- Philadelphia: Arrange to ride from the small planes to the terminal on a horse and buggy. It would be faster.
- Houston: Force the architect to write “A straight line is the shortest distance between two points” one million times or until his hand falls off. Make this an exhibit at the airport.
- Dallas/
Fort Worth Create a wildlife park for the part of the inter-terminal (inter-minable) train ride which runs outside of the actual terminal. Or see if Disney would build a version of the “It’s a small world” exhibit. Add surrey fringes to the train’s exterior.
- Seattle: Make people go through security between every gate. Consider adding security screening stations to the bathrooms.
- Atlanta: Add a first class section and food service to the underground trains.
- Denver: Move it farther out from the city. Kansas or Missouri should be about right.
- Reagan
National: Change the name back to just “National.” I don’t like flying into an airport named after the man who fired the air traffic controllers. One of them is gonna snap one day. “Fight 265? I don’t see any flight 265 here on my outdated computer equipment!”
- Albuquerque: Provide free green chile stew at every gate.
- Saint Louis: Tear it down and start over. Or move the Denver airport here.

Airplane size

Airplanes come in all sizes and shapes. This is required by the airplane mechanics union. If there was only one type of airplane, it would be too easy to maintain them. Multiple airplane types require that airlines keep a large inventory of spare parts - usually at a conveniently located central position (Panama). It is not uncommon to have a flight delayed while they fly in a new toilet handle for the rear lavatory.

⁴You may not know it but San Diego was voted by the airline pilots as the *most difficult* airport to land at (at which to land, in which to land, on which to land, to land in and on). Next hardest was National, but that was because they wouldn’t let them fly over the White House like they wanted to.

There is no known limit to the size of airplanes.⁵ They are now working on a plane so large that you can board in New York and get off in Cleveland without leaving the ground. This requires that you walk back 436,000 rows to your seat and then get off.

Overhead storage

Overhead storage is the main source of entertainment on airplanes. I recently saw a woman stuff a bag the shape of a pig into the overhead bin on a 757. She rearranged several other bags and re-stowed a leather jacket by crumpling it up in a tiny ball. When she was finished everyone on the airplane applauded except the owner of the leather jacket.

The constitution of the United States once guaranteed the right to life liberty and overhead storage space. But this was changed by the airline lobbyist association which now controls both Congress and the Supreme Court.

Airlines have begun to limit carry-on⁶ items to two pieces which can fit inside the glove compartment of a mid-size car. This is designed to teach business travelers to wear the same underwear 14 days in a row. This builds character. Character builds profits. Profits pay airfares.

Checking your bags

The alternative to overhead storage is checking your bags. This means that you turn your valuable possessions over to complete strangers who rifle through, take what they want and return your case to its destination. This may or may not be the same as *your* destination. This happened to me on a flight from Salt Lake City through Denver to Baltimore. Three of the items stolen were a petite woman's sweater, some Buddhist bells, and a Mad Hatter hat from Disneyland. Somewhere in Denver there is a small female Buddhist crook in a funny hat.

FAA Regulations

The FAA has only one concern and that is that your flight should be very carefully regulated. Everything about a flight is regulated down to the size and shape of the body bags they use to haul away crash victims. No seriously. Because of the FAA there actually are no crash victims. Those who die in airplane crashes are required to acknowledge that it was their own fault for taking that particular flight. It's a federal regulation. (Look at the back of your ticket.)

⁵The Great Flying Goose, designed by Howard Hughes, was the largest passenger plane ever flown. Unfortunately, it was accidentally shot down in 1958 over Easton, Maryland during hunting season.

⁶Two vultures are boarding a plane, dragging dead animals behind them. One says to the other: "I hear the airlines are proposing limits on our carrion luggage."

Other useful FAA regulations require that no flight can leave the gate without proper paperwork. On a flight from Atlanta last year, the pilot announced that we were all ready to go except for paperwork from the dispatcher. (The dispatcher is the same person who controls taxis in the Atlanta area. This assures that taxis and airplanes are never closer than 3 miles apart as a matter of safety. This is why 3 miles is the minimum distance from the taxi drop-off zone to your gate.) This paperwork had to be retrieved *by hand*. The FAA does not own modern technology like faxes, email, pagers, computers or golf carts. After waiting one hour (this is a true story), a little piece of yellow paper was handed through the front door, the door was closed and the plane pulled away from the gate. It is a miracle of modern FAA regulation that airplane departures can be delayed because a small piece of paper is missing from the cockpit.⁷ Other FAA miracles include computer controller screens that do nothing but play reruns of I Love Lucy.

Airport names

Cities are trying to come up with more and more creative names for their airports. It's not enough to just name them after famous people, like John Wayne or Ronald McDonald. They actually change the name "airport" itself.

My favorite airport name is Sky Harbor Phoenix. This is very clever. We used to spend hours in dingy boat harbors waiting for sailing ships that took months to cross the Atlantic. Now we don't have to do that any more. Now we can wait months for airplane fares affordable enough to cross the Atlantic in hours. But the real beauty of "sky harbor" is the image of fishermen returning to the harbor with the catch of the day. I think of airplanes coming in from a long day of flying with their fresh catch of birds. Birds of every description: seagulls, albatross, tripe and troon. And the local restaurants would feature fresh birds from the airport that day. "May I recommend the troon, Madame. It is very fresh today."

Baltimore's airport used to be called Friendship airport. Now it's called Baltimore Washington International Airport because it's trying to get business from people going to Washington DC who have no idea where Washington is in relation to Baltimore. This is a very clever strategy which need not stop here. I think they should call it Baltimore Washington Paris Rangoon International Airport and they would get even more business. The taxi ride to Burma⁸ is actually only slightly more than to downtown Washington.

Many airports have added the word "international" to their name. This is particularly impressive with very small airports, like Burlington International Airport and Skagway International Airport. This means of course that planes come and go to other countries from that airport - other countries meaning Canada. Many other transportation facilities along the U.S. Canadian border have adopted this same convention. We now have the Great Falls Montana International Burger Joint and the Buffalo New York International Truck Stop. The principle consequence of the international designation is that

⁷One theory is that these pieces of paper are actually used to insulate the airplanes electrical system. The FAA claims that the real reason is to make paper airplanes which are actually used to keep the real airplane aloft during flight.

⁸Now Yangon, Myanmar in case the driver gets lost.

these airports must be specially equipped for international travelers (read drug smugglers and terrorists.)

Drug Smugglers and Terrorists

I am completely against drug smuggling and terrorism. It is wrong. It is against the law. And it makes going through security a very nerve-wracking experience. The FAA has required that all international airports have very elaborate safeguards against drug smuggling and terrorists. These safeguards include metal detectors, x-ray machines and new devices that “smell” the chemicals on your luggage and can actually tell what you had for breakfast that morning. I personally feel much safer knowing that all this high tech equipment is on hand and is carefully operated by people who were unable to find a better job. If this is not the most boring job in the world I don’t know what is. Imagine staring at pictures of peoples’ luggage all day and analyzing what they had for breakfast.

It is also a known fact that any real terrorists could waltz through security any time they want. In fact, international terrorist organizations give out prizes every year in two principle categories: the most times through security, and the most creatively dangerous things carried through security. One terrorist, who shall remain nameless, went through security with a Mickey Mouse doll made of plastic explosives 1,362 times in one day. He did this by going back and forth through security at Orlando Florida. He had to stand in line for hours of course. But for terrorists, this is just like standing in line for a ride at Disneyland.

This reminds me of a true story⁹ which occurred on a trip my ex-wife took with a business colleague. The business colleague, who shall remain nameless, Fred, had purchased an inflatable airplane toy to bring home to his young son who shall also remain nameless, Tommy. While they were sitting on the runway, waiting to take off, Fred pulled the toy out of his briefcase and in a loud voice asked my wife if she thought he should “blow up the plane now?” All conversation ceased (even between strangers) and he had to hold up the toy airplane and show it to all the passengers, the pilot, and the pilot’s lawyer, before the plane could take off.

Drug smugglers are different of course. They only want to go through security one time for each shipment. And they have devised elaborate schemes to do this. The most consistently successful scheme, of course is to be a white person. And drug smugglers of all races creeds and religions have adopted this approach. The most common current “profile” for a drug smuggler is a white male aged 45 in a three piece business suit reading the Wall Street Journal. You see these people being body searched at airports all the time.

Airport abbreviations

These are three letter codes used by baggage “handlers” to send your bag to the wrong airport. If they wrote the full name of the airport it might actually go to the right airport. But the FAA forbids any baggage handler from writing the full name of the airport on your luggage. No one can actually remember what the 3 letter codes mean so they go to

⁹As opposed to the completely fabricated stories used by other less scrupulous authors.

whatever airport the baggage handler on duty at the time thinks it means. Some common mistakes include:

- DIA: Down in Arkansas Actually Denver
- SFO: Sally Forth Oklahoma Actually San Francisco
- BWI: Back Water Idaho Actually Baltimore
- LAX: OK to take a break now Actually Los Angeles
- ZOO: Saint Louis or Detroit Actually Saint Louis or Detroit
- FOG: Feds on the Grounds Look busy, It's the FAA

Canterbury Tales

Nobody can remember Chaucer's first name. Let's call him Chuck. Chuck wrote a famous book about travelers trapped together at an inn and each told a tale about his or her life. This was considered high entertainment in the period before FAA regulations *required* that air travelers tell you their life story.

Talking to strangers

Your mother told you never to talk to strangers. She was right. 90% of strangers are boring. The other 10% are dangerous. On a recent flight a perfect stranger¹⁰ talked the entire way from Washington DC to Denver. I pretended to listen attentively by putting plugs in my ears and looking out the window. This is also a good way to listen to your co-workers at meetings.

The International Association of Strangers has adopted a Bill of Rights for Strangers which includes the right to babble incoherently on any subject, the right to ignore, rebuff and rebuke lack of attention, and the right to put their head on your shoulder and snore. These rights were subsequently recognized by the United Nations, the World Court at the Hague and the International Terrorists and Smugglers Association (ITSA)¹¹.

Frequent fliers however do not recognize these rights and will almost always honor the privacy and integrity of their "seatmates" by not talking, touching, fondling, fretting, fuming or otherwise engaging a person they do not, and would rather not, know. Frequent fliers however can often be seen talking to themselves. And after 16 hours in 4 different airports it can feel like talking to a stranger.

¹⁰This is a stranger who is not flawed in any way.

¹¹As in "ITSA crime" or "ITSA shame"

Frequent flier miles

Frequent flier miles constitute a new form of currency which can now be traded on foreign exchanges for Yen or Sou. Airlines have arranged to have their new currency backed by the Bank of Lithuania. Use of FFM's has grown enormously as a form of payment. There are now some former welfare recipients who are paid exclusively in FFM's. And it is now the preferred form of payment for drug smugglers and terrorists.

You can accumulate FFM's by doing one of three things: flying frequently, talking frequently, or buying things frequently. All of these activities will make you too poor to afford a cab to the airport and so you will never get to actually use your FFM's. You can use them instead to make a charitable donation to the Bank of Lithuania.

Airlines have discovered several ways to take away your FFM's after you have earned them. The first way is by increasing the number of FFM's you need to get a free ticket. Some day you will need 10 round trips on the space shuttle just to get a free one-way ticket to Cleveland. Other cities will require travel to other planets or parallel universes.

The second way airlines take away your FFM's is by restricting the number of seats which can be used for frequent flier trips. These few seats (estimated by the FAA at 3 per flight, way in the back) are available on a first come first serve basis, which means that they are mostly all taken up by the time you want to make a reservation. So you have to do this months or years in advance, well ahead of when you know you actually want to travel. "I think I'll go to Cleveland two years from now in February." Even then you usually get the most inconvenient flights. One airline, which shall remain nameless, tried to route my daughter from Denver to Baltimore overnight via Los Angeles. And the return trip started from an airport in another state.

Airlines also have what are known as blackout dates, which are the dates on which it is estimated that the pilot of your flight will blackout from exhaustion or boredom. No, really, they're the dates around holidays when everyone wants to use their frequent flier miles. Eventually there will be only two days a year when it is possible to use FFM's. This will be February 13th if you are going to someplace cold, and August 13th if you are going to someplace hot.

Frequent fliers are so grateful for the chance to fly free that they will put up with just about any insult or indignity. In the future, using FFM's will actually require that you clean the houses of airline employees several times before the flight.

Electronic devices

Everyone who flies knows that the People In Charge Of The AirPlane (PICOTAP) - the pilot, copilot, stewardpeople

and chief purser¹² - ask you to “please discontinue the use of personal electronic devices¹³ for the first and last 10 minutes of the flight.

The reason they give when asked is that these devices¹⁴ “may interfere with the navigational and other electronic systems of the airplane.” Translated into English this means that the device in my hands could cause the plane to go off course and land in the wrong city - or it could cause the plane to crash.

Now let’s assume for a minute that this is true - that my cassette tape player could cause us to crash or to land in Cleveland when we were heading for San Diego. This is truly terrifying. These plane systems are so fragile that a little electric current in the vicinity could cause a disaster like landing in Cleveland. This becomes most alarming when the plane is flying through a thunderstorm. Here we have hundreds of trillions of volts in the very near vicinity. And the People In Charge Of The AirPlane seem perfectly calm. Yet they’re all beside themselves if some teenager with headphones is listening to punk rock on final approach.

I personally think the whole thing is a fraud. Electronic devices are no more dangerous to airplanes than toenail clippers. The problem here is not science. It’s law. The company lawyer and the insurers are trying to ferret out every possible cause for an airplane to unexpectedly land in Cleveland. And as a group they understand toenail clippers much better than video camcorders. Although don’t be surprised if, on a future flight, the PICOTAP ask you to please stop clipping your nails ten minutes before you land.

Personal note: I once actually kept my cassette player going for an entire landing. The plane did not crash. But as it turns out, it was already a flight to Cleveland.

Gate change announcements

Never expect to actually leave from the gate posted for your flight. Airlines love to change gates. This is a game for the airline employees who get a particular charge out of people racing up to the gate at the last minute - or even better,

¹²What is a chief purser anyway, and when did they start sending these people on flights? Maybe this is the first step to turning airplanes into branch offices of banks. “Would you like a loan with your beverage, sir?”

¹³These devices include radios, cassette players, CD players, laptop computers, gameboys, gamegirls, video players, rugby players, camcorders, hamcorders, corduroys, microwaves, toaster ovens, neck massagers, knee braces, vibrators, vibratos, contraltos, castanets, bassinets, flutophones, electric organs, eclectic organs, flashlights, spotlights,

¹⁴searchlights, lawnmowers, hedge trimmers, catapults, octapults, scubagear, raingear, headgear, cell phones, amoeba phones, algae phones, copiers, fax machines, dumptrucks, backhoes and of course any personal airplanes you may be operating.

sending 200 people from one end of the airport to the other. You sometimes see aimless herds of people wandering through airports looking despondent, asking “Where might we find flight 265, and what is the meaning of life anyway?”

One time in Seattle, I made the mistake of listening to my headphones in the “gate area.” Everything seemed normal. An airplane pulled up to the gate. People got off. The ground crew was preparing it to take off again. We were getting close to departure time, so I went up to the “check in desk.”

“When do you think we’ll start boarding?” I said.

They looked at me like I had a terrible disease.

“Boarding?” they said. “For what flight might you be boarding?”

“Well, flight 265 to Cleveland.” I said.

“Didn’t you hear the GATE CHANGE ANNOUNCEMENT?” THEY SAID.

The flight had been moved to another gate in a nearby city. By the time I got there, the DOORS WERE CLOSED. I asked them to please OPEN THE DOORS, and of course they wouldn’t do this for me. They only OPEN THE DOORS for someone who is late if it happens to be the pilot or his or her lawyer, or the person with the yellow paper.

Now I try to anticipate gate change announcements (GCA’s). I go to a gate at random and ask, “Is this the gate for flight 265 to Cleveland?” “No,” they say. “Well, it will be,” I say and stalk off.

Personal note: While I was writing this my gate was changed from B7 to C23 at O’Hare, a particularly creative gate change considering I came in at gate C22. This gate change was subsequently nominated for an award at the annual convention of Airline Gate Attendants in the category of longest distance between changed gates. (Approximately one half mile). Other categories include “Gate changes with the most missed connections,” and “Most confusing gate change announcements.” The winner made the announcement in Samoan.

Planes for big people

I am a big person by some standards. 6 feet, 2 inches,¹⁵ long legs, big feet. Airplanes are not designed for people like me. They are designed for a type of human most often seen in circuses: contortionists.¹⁶

Airlines of course know how to make seats comfortable for big people. They just choose not to do it. This is because

¹⁵That’s front to back.

¹⁶I think contortionists are fine people and I have no intention of distorting their reputation. I use these references only to illustrate a point. I hope my contortionist friends will forgive me.

they make more money if we are all crammed together like tuna.¹⁷

Someday, airplane seating will be optional, and passengers will be required to stand. This will change pre-flight procedures somewhat. “For those passengers seated in our first class cabin, please buckle your seatbelts low and tight across your lap. For those in coach, please hold on to each other for dear life.” Subway style hand holds will be provided. Padded helmets will be available for a \$4 charge to protect your head during turbulence. This will solve the problem of big people on airplanes, just as it solved the problem of big people on subways. In the meantime, we big people will be strong. We will develop calluses on our knees. We will choke down our claustrophobia. We will drink heavily.

The moving walkway is ending. Please look down.

For most travelers this is a useful courtesy provided by the airport to prevent the embarrassment of flying off the end of the walkway face down in the contents of your luggage and then getting up and suing the airport. But for frequent travelers this message can be a form of living hell. If your departure gate happens to be near the end of a moving walkway, you may have to listen to this message over and over again until you are seized by the urge to leap up, run to the end of the walkway and scream, “ For God’s sake, people, can’t you see that the walkway is ending!! Please, please, I beg you, look down before it is too late!!” For many frequent travelers it becomes a deeply ingrained part of their psyche. And most major hub cities have old “travelers” on street corners warning people over and over, “The moving walkway is ending. Please look down.” “The moving walkway is ending. Please look down.” “The moving walkway is ending. Please look down.” “The moving walkway is ending. Please look down.” “The moving walkway is ending. Please look down.” “The moving walkway is ending. Please look down.” “The moving walkway is ending. Please look down.” “The moving walkway is ending. Please look down.....”

Volunteers

This may come as a shock to you, but airlines occasionally sell more seats than actually exist on a given airplane. This is known as overbooking. Airlines would never do this on purpose of course, because this would mean that some of their valued customers might be somehow delayed or inconvenienced. But, when it does happen, the airlines try to express their deep regret by asking for “volunteers” who are willing to give up their seat in exchange for some form of generous compensation.

When this situation first occurred years ago, the airlines tried compensation in the form of a free meal at a fast food restaurant in the passenger’s destination city. However the FAA, ever vigilant when it comes to passenger rights, insisted that the meal be provided in the same city where the passenger was stuck. Over time this system evolved to where the airline offers - in addition to fast food - a flight coupon good for future travel on the same airline. The people who volunteer don’t realize that these coupons are worthless - because they are not going anywhere. Not today and not on

¹⁷The phrase “crammed together like sardines™” has been purchased by Macrosoft and is no longer available for general use by the public.

some future flight. The profit margins of the airlines depend on certain people buying tickets and not using them. These people are the “volunteers.” There are some volunteers who have now spent most of their lives at the same airport - living off of fast food.

Screaming Infant Airlines

My favorite airline is Screaming Infant Airlines. This is the airline where you must be accompanied by a screaming infant to board. I can usually get an exemption and I bring along my earplugs and tranquilizers. It’s a vacation from screaming adults.

Screaming infants are a more and more common occurrence on airplanes. A recent survey showed that 85% of all frequent fliers had developed skin rashes and nervous ticks as a result of screaming infants. Of course I feel sorry for the poor parents who have to tend to these wonderful children. It’s not their fault. It’s not the child’s fault. It’s really nobody’s fault. Just get them the hell off my airplane.

I think, as a service to the parents of screaming infants, that we should provide them with their own separate transportation system: separate airplanes, separate terminals, separate cities. Some cities could volunteer to host the SIA hubs. These cities would get tax breaks because many airline and other employees would need on the job psychiatric help. The US Department of Transportation could make this a priority for the next millennium - now that the interstate highway system is finished and the air traffic controllers have the best and most up to date computer equipment.

I think children of all ages are wonderful. I have three wonderful children of my own.¹⁸ I regret that families are so spread out these days that it is necessary to transport little Billie 2,000 miles to Grandma’s Thanksgiving Day feast. I would just prefer that little Billie not scream his lungs out in the seat next to me.

Unusual noises

First time fliers are sometimes surprised by the astonishing number of noises which airplanes make. These noises actually have a simple explanation. The airplane is in the process of coming apart in mid flight. Every sound you hear is one more bit of wear and tear on an old piece of machinery which has no business being 35,000 feet above Mother Earth.

There is really nothing to worry about. FAA regulators have a system in place for assuring the regular maintenance and repair of every airplane in service. This system involves analyzing crashes and making sure that that particular crash never happens again. This means that only new crashes will occur. Eventually the airline industry will run out of ways to make

¹⁸Although I never transported them on an airplane when they were infants - but this was a long time ago when people with young children couldn’t afford to fly. And the grandmas were 2 minutes and 2 hours away (respectively) by car.

airplanes crash and everything will be all right. Unfortunately this will not happen in your lifetime.

Some of the most common noises which you may hear on your next flight include:

! *Shudder and vibration right after takeoff*: This is the airplane expressing the thought, “Not again. I just did this.” Machines have funny ways of expressing themselves.

! *Grating and grinding sound just before landing*: This is the pilot extending or lowering the flaps of the airplane. Flaps are parts of the wing that make it bigger and more stable during slower flight¹⁹ The sound of lowering flaps should be music to a travelers’ ears. It means “We’re almost there.” It also means you are about to enter the most dangerous part of the flight. It’s pretty easy to make an airplane take off. Point it down the runway. Run up the engines and it pretty much takes off by itself. Landing is another matter. It requires that some fatigued older person find this little tiny strip of concrete and lightly set down some 100 ton contraption. Nothing to worry about.

! *Dull thud, also just before landing*: This is the pilot lowering the landing gear. It feels like someone just punched the airplane in the stomach. It is accompanied by a jolt as the airplane slows down due to increased drag. This sound should alarm you only if you don’t hear it. If for some reason you believe the pilot has forgotten to lower the landing gear²⁰ then you should inform the flight crew by gesturing to them. The international signal for “the pilot forgot to lower the landing gear” is both arms crossed in an “x” above your head while you bounce up and down in your seat.

! *Low moan during descent*: This is the sound of all the passengers on the plane experiencing pain in their ears. This is caused by the change in pressure on the inner and outer ear causing the inner ear to think seriously about exploding. This sound has nothing to do with the airplane itself. And it should gradually go away as you lose your hearing from all the air travel you do.

! *High pitched squeal during ascent*: This is the sound of the animals in the luggage compartment saying something like: “Whoopee, I’m sure glad my wonderful owner took me on this joyful ride.” Actually the poor critters are scared out of their wits. They think they have been swallowed by a great behemoth, never to see their nasty treacherous owners ever again. This too has nothing to do with the performance of the airplane, unless one of these animals is unusually large. Always ask your travel agent if the airplane you will be traveling on is scheduled to transport any of the following animals: elephants, rhinoceri, triceratops, water buffalo, wine buffalo, perrier buffalo, whales, sharks, marangos, marimbas, placidos or domingos.

Smoke detectors

¹⁹Another true and useful fact from this fact filled book.

²⁰And, yes, this has actually happened.

It is illegal and immoral to tamper with a smoke detector in an airplane lavatory. These detectors are there for your own protection. They detect when a nicotine addict has reached the breaking point and is willing to risk heavy fines and incarceration to feed his or her habit. These devices are actually sponsored by the tobacco industry in an effort to help these poor people. Whenever a smoke detector goes off, the airplane crew has been carefully trained to rush into “therapy” mode and help the passenger understand the dangers of smoking and speed them on their road to recovery.

This only applies, however, if the product being smoked is a tobacco product. If it is some other “illegal” addictive substance, then the airline employees rush into “police” mode. They inform the person that they are pathetic worthless scum that do not belong on the face of the earth and would best spend the rest of their lives away from productive society in prison.

These two modes of response reflect the airline industry’s commendable efforts to uphold the social policies of the countries in which they operate. In the United States, certain addictive substances are legal and others are not. The airlines are committed to supporting this distinction through the use of smoke detectors. On some international flights, those who smoke in lavatories are sometimes flogged before landing. The airline industry is ever willing to help.

Airfares

Airfares are precisely calculated by modern scientific methods to generate the most possible money for the airlines while making the least possible sense to the flying public. The mastery of these twin goals is perhaps best illustrated by a flight last year between Baltimore and Pittsburgh - two hubs for an airline that shall remain nameless.

Hubs, by the way, are the breeding grounds for airplanes of a given airline. The planes socialize, mate, spawn and raise their young, who, as adults, come back to the very same airport to repeat the process. The airplanes from one airline are genetically prone to drive out the airplanes of other airlines so they can have the hub breeding ground all to themselves.

So this flight from one hub to another (a distance of about 250 miles) cost about \$600 round trip, a price calculated by dividing the cost of the airplane by the number of passengers. But then, one week later, I flew from Baltimore to Columbus Ohio - **through Pittsburgh** (a distance of about 350 miles) and the flight cost \$240 round trip!

Now any reasonable person would think: Next time I want to go to Pittsburgh, I’ll really book a flight to Columbus at half the cost and just get off in Pittsburgh. But this would be a big mistake because the airline computer - Hal 4000 - would know that you got off in Pittsburgh and would cancel the rest of your ticket (including the return flight) because in fact you made the biggest mistake possible in air travel - you figured it out. Airlines make their profit by assuming that no one can actually figure it out. And mostly they’re right.

First Class

The genius of first class is that the airlines get you to pay a lot extra to be treated the way you should be treated all the time. (If people think indignity is normal, then they will pay anything to be treated like a human being.)

The first class/coach class system is changing however. First class seats are getting smaller. And eventually first class will evolve to become coach class, as we know it today. And then there will be three lower classes of service:

Crouch class: which will require passengers to squat for the entire flight

Chicken class: with passengers in vertically stacked cages, and

Mortuary class: where passengers are stowed lying down in wall units in the baggage compartment.

This last class is particularly important since for the first time it will not actually matter in terms of airline design whether the passengers are alive or dead.

This is all part of the cosmic convergence taking place in the airline industry where the boundary between passengers and their luggage is slowly disappearing. When this is complete, passengers and luggage will be one. Airline employees will throw passengers onto the plane and stack them below. Airlines will give passengers cheerful little Zen-like buttons to wear that say: "I am my luggage." right above the destination bar code. When this happens the chance of you and you luggage arriving in the same city will finally be almost the same.

Check-in

Check in occurs in one of three ways: at the curb, at the ticket counter or at the gate. If you have checked in at the curb you must also check in at the ticket counter or the gate. If you check in at the gate you must also check in at the curb or the counter. If you check in at the counter and the gate, you must also check in at the bookstore and Burger King.

The first thing you must do at check-in is present a government issued picture ID. This is to make sure that you really are who you say you are. The agent carefully compares the picture on your card to one of the following:

- a) your actual face to see if you are the same person in the photo.
- b) a file containing the pictures of known drug smugglers and terrorists
- c) the Victoria Secret catalogue on the check-in desk (female agents are deciding what to order and male agents are, well, you know...)

The correct answer is, of course, C. There are no pictures of known drug smugglers and terrorists, and the airline agent is too busy to really care what you look like.

The next thing you need to know about check-in is the requirement that before you can be fully checked in, the agent must type a 4,000 word essay on "why this person deserves to fly." You may have noticed the check-in agent typing furiously at the keyboard. You may think that all they have to do is enter your name and flight to complete the check-in process. But the airline computer system is so old that it requires the check-in agent to memorize 40 pages of codes,

and type these codes in exactly the right order. You may have noticed one agent consulting with another agent about codes.

Agent 1: "I tried to transmogrify the reservation binary reclamation number by entering the passenger's mother's maiden name, but the computer system won't respond."

Agent 2: "Have you tried entering the code on page 36 of the Victoria Secrets catalogue?"

Airport employees love to check you in because this is when they have the most power over you.

"Have you or any members of your family ever taken your eyes off this suitcase since you purchased it?" Have you talked to any strangers in the last 24 hours, and if so, did any admit to being a drug smuggler or terrorist?"

These are known as "security questions" because they assure the job security of the airline gate attendants. Without these questions, and the years of security training behind them, the airlines could get by with far fewer gate attendants because the cleaning crew could check you in while they're waiting for the plane to arrive.

All air travelers have dreamed of giving honest answers to these questions.

Gate attendant: "Have any of your bags been out of your control since you packed them?"

Me: "Yes, I left the bag with the hotel desk clerk all day while I went to meetings. He looked suspicious."

GA: "Did he ask you to carry anything on the plane?"

Me: "He gave me this little receipt for my bag which may have been soaked with LSD."

GA: "Well, I'm sorry but we'll have to confiscate your bags so the FBI can use them for target practice."

My favorite is when the GA forgets where they are in the check-in process. And they ask **you** if they already asked you the "security questions." If you were really a drug smuggler or terrorist what would you say? Think back to the last time you saw a drug smuggler or terrorist getting hauled away for messing up the security questions.

GA: "Have your bags been in your control since you packed them?"

DsorT: "No I am just an instrument of the great revolution. My bags and all my possessions are controlled by our courageous leader in Albuufistan."

GA: "Have any strangers asked you to carry anything on this flight for them?"

DsorT: “No, the explosives in my bags were all given to me by my closest friends and associates.”

GA: “Thank you. Would you prefer aisle or window?”

Of course, the other power part of check-in is “seat assignment.” If you have done anything at all to irritate the GA, like give sarcastic answers to the security questions, they will put you in a middle seat between two members of the International Sumo Association. Possible seat assignments are: window, aisle, center, wing, forward, fullback, full view, obstructed view, perch, pew, stool, rocking chair, folding chair, and electric chair, which must be shut off until 10 minutes after take off.

Airlines used to “pre-assign” seats, but they don’t do this anymore. They now use one of two methods to get passengers to the correct seat: “gate assigned” seating or “every man for himself”²¹ seating. In EMFH seating, the passengers hurl themselves and their luggage onto the plane and scrape and claw until everyone is safely seated and has stopped bleeding. Many airlines have come to prefer this method because it is so much fun to watch. (See also “Overhead Storage.”)

Parking

Air travel actually has less to do with flying and more to do with parking. Airports have three levels of parking: hourly, daily and weekly. These designations indicate how long it will take you to get from the parking area to your gate. Daily and weekly parkers usually check in to a hotel near the parking lot so that on the day of their flight they can arrange transportation to the terminal. Airports will soon be offering monthly and yearly parking. Air travelers will be encouraged to buy campers and RV’s and live at the airport.

Once you have decided on hourly, daily, weekly, monthly or yearly parking, the next challenge is finding an actual parking space. This has become more difficult since airports began renting out their parking lots for car dealers’ inventory. Finding an open space involves driving through the entire layout of the parking area until at last you find yourself in death defying competition with another car for the same space. The stakes in this competition are nothing less than whether or not you make your flight and arrive at your destination in time to keep your job and prevent your family conflict from exploding into violence. The driver of the losing car is doomed to unemployment and unbearable sniping by injured and ungrateful relatives.

Once you have secured a parking space, getting from your chosen parking area to the terminal usually involves the use of “shuttles.” Shuttles are small bus-like vehicles originally designed to transport air cargo, produce and farm animals. Shuttle operators have been carefully trained to avoid moving the shuttle unless at least one passenger is completely off balance. Shuttle drivers can actually time their starts and stops to throw Olympic athletes to the ground. I once had a shuttle driver who almost broke my collar bone by flinging me into one of those vertical subway-style poles they use to

²¹Which is now technically “every person for his or her own self” or EPFHOHOS seating.

create the illusion of safety. The FAA, in a remarkable act of regulatory ingenuity, will not allow an airplanes to push back from the gate until everyone is safely seated, while a stone's throw away those same passengers are hurled about like raw meat in a butcher shop. Soon the FAA will require that flowers be sent to any passenger who actually requires hospitalization as a result of a shuttle "accident."

Ground transportation

The word "ground" is used in "ground transportation" the same as in "ground beef." When you are ready to leave the airport, there are four types of ground transportation available: car rental, taxis, van services and walking.

1. Car rental: The most important form of ground transportation is car rental. Car rental counters are usually located near baggage claim. However the cars themselves are located at least a two day's drive from the airport.²² In order to get to your car you need to ride in a convenient shuttle for two days or two years off your life whichever comes first. In one airport which shall remain nameless²³ you must actually get on an interstate highway to reach the rental car "facility," then hike a quarter mile to the rental counter and another quarter mile to the cars themselves. This is intended to discourage the use of rental cars since there is no room for them on the highways anyway.

2. Taxis: Taxis are available at most large airports and may be summoned to smaller airports with a month's notice and a small cash deposit. Taxi drivers have been carefully trained to tell you their entire life story in the precise time it takes to get to your hotel. The most pathetic stories earn the biggest tip. It turns out that most taxi drivers were once professors of nuclear medicine at a prestigious foreign hospital and are now the sole support for two thirds of that country's orphaned children. Taxis will generally take you directly to your hotel, as opposed to...

3. Van services: Van services pack as many travelers as possible into a VW minibus and then stop at every hotel within a 30 mile radius of the airport, before finally getting to yours. This process can take hours, days or even weeks - and some smart travelers simply stay on the van until it is time for their return flight.

4. Walking: You might as well.

The language of flight

English is the international language of flight. But English is the native language of less than 10% of the world's population. This means that 90% of the world's airplane pilots (more or less) are flying around talking to ground control in their second, third or fourth language. This is actually a serious problem. There was a crash in Asia several years ago

²²This is because the commuter airplanes would beat up the cars and take their lunch money.

²³San Francisco

where the last words on the flight recorder were “What does it mean ‘pull up’?”²⁴

I have no ready solution to this. It wouldn't really be better if Mandarin were the standard language of flight even though this would be the choice if it were put to a world vote. One possible solution is baby talk. This seems to be similar across many cultures. Infants first experiment with vowel and consonant sounds which are only later differentiated into legal and real estate terms. Or better yet, pilots could use sign language or the flag system used by lifeguards²⁵.

The reason this is so important is that English is a terribly ambiguous language. The word “right” means at least three different things: the direction right, the correct thing to do and a conservative political philosophy. And yet this word is used all the time in giving instructions to pilots. “Turn right” could mean change direction, or do a good job changing direction, or join the Republican party. It would not help airline safety if foreign pilots thought air traffic control was commanding them to join the Republican party²⁶. And we haven't even dealt with turning left, or the many definitions of “heading,” “drop,” “level,” “turbulent,” and “prepubescent.” Don't be surprised if on some future flight, native English speakers are called up to the cockpit to help out. “If there is anyone on board named Jones or Smith, would they please come up here and help the pilot figure out how to land this thing. And we think it would be better, Mr. Jones or Smith, if you are also a Republican.”

Air travel in the future, tense

As you can see, air travel is safe, glamorous and exciting. It is an experience of comfort and ease, filled with memorable new friends and experiences you can treasure for a lifetime. The airline industry operates with the traveler's best interest at heart. The FAA is constantly vigilant for every possible way to make air travel safer and more comfortable. Airline employees are uncompromising professionals, expertly trained and equipped. Airports have been designed by the best architects in the world with every convenience of home and office. It is the future we all dreamed of. And it can only get better from here.

Of course this depends in part on you, the traveler. A foolish complacency is the hobgoblin of smallish minds. And hobgoblins won't pay the rent, bring home the bacon, keep that spring in your step or that crank in your shaft. So don't lower your expectations. Don't allow the delights of air travel to make you complacent. The quality of air travel could come crashing down around us if we let down our guard. And the smugglers and terrorists, the strangers and gate attendants, the mechanics and pilots and pursers will be there, watching, waiting hoping that somehow you, the air traveler²⁷, can put it back together again. Well you can't. And you wouldn't. And it makes no sense to think that you

²⁴I know that this actually happened, because it was reported in USA Today.

²⁵This would require pilots to master the use of semaphores, metaphors, 4x4's and 2x4's.

²⁶Or the Democratic, Reform, Libertarian or New Year's party.

²⁷with assistance from the king's horses.

could. We need to make sure that we hang on to what we have now. Because, as any reasonable person can see, air travel is already perfect like it is.

Homage to Dave Barry

Dave Barry is one of my heros. Dave is much funnier than I am. And he's also much better looking. I say these things partly out of deep respect for Dave, and partly so that Dave will not sue me. Even though there may be some small resemblance in our writing style (we both grew up near Philadelphia), I have not consciously taken any of his material. Everything here is original as far as I know. So please don't sue me, Dave. And please, dear reader, buy lots of Dave's books.

Convenient space for important notes

The space below is provided for you to write important notes. This could include your name and address, so you can remember who you actually are on long trips. It could also include the neck size, dress size, leg size and ego size of loved ones the airline should notify in the event of a crash. Or you could just leave it blank. That's what I would do.