

Raving reviews from the author's family and friends, etc.

“This book will never fly.”
—Rosabeth Moss Kanter

“I really liked the font.”
—Ed Zajak

“This book is worth the paper it's written on.”
—Philip Kottler

“This is not a book to be put aside lightly.
It should be thrown out with great force.”
—Manfred Kets de Vries

“Of all the books Mintzberg has written,
this is without a doubt his latest.”
—Lee Bolman

“Don't encourage him . . . there's more.”
—Susie Mintzberg

“Once I had put this book down,
I could not pick it up again.”
—Tim Goodfellow

“I could have been so proud.”
—Mom Mintzberg (aged 90)

“This is Mintzberg humor at its best. I know, I had to grow up with it.”

—Lisa Mintzberg

“Henry hates flying? Ha? He should try doing it on Christmas Eve!”

—Santa (Rodrigues, not Claus, PA to HM)

“I laughed, I cried, then I read the book.”

—Steve Kerr

“This is Henry’s best travel book to date.”

—Bill Starbuck

“This book is simply awesome (or do I mean awful?). It is deeply grounded with tantalizing tidbits.

—John Seely Brown

“I cannot write an ‘insult’ to promote your book since it deals so well with the insults that the airlines unload on us that I found myself cringing with sympathy. In short, it is not a spoof!”

—Ian Mitroff

“Henry, remember Icarus?”

—Nathalie Tremblay

“Yeah, but Rosabeth says it will never fly. Besides, Mitch liked it.”

—Henry Mintzberg

“Yeah, but who believes Mitch?”

—Mitch Koza

“Let them laugh Henry. You can always try again.”

—Mom, again

Here goes mom, dedicated it to you!

The bottom line?

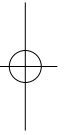
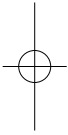
Waste no time in reading this book!

The Flying Circus

Why We Love to Hate
Our Airlines and Airports

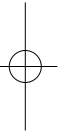
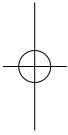
Henry Mintzberg

If you want to know why we love to hate flying,
you'll have to wait a minute.



Don't be so impatient. Just wait here like everyone else.

We're scheduled to begin momentarily.

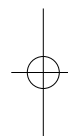
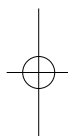


Before allowing you to proceed, I am required to ask you a few little questions:

1. Did you pick this book yourself?
2. Have you left this book unattended at any time since picking it (in the back of the car, for example)?
3. Does this book contain any substance that could be harmful to its readers? Indeed, does this book contain any substance at all?

If you have answered each of these questions, with a "Yes," "No," "Whatever," or whatever, we can proceed. Otherwise you will have to report to Insecurity.

It won't be long now.



Welcome aboard, ladies and gentlemen

This is your author scribbling. Prior to take-on, while you are settling into your seats to laugh about flying, it is my duty to inform you that this book is about more than flying and therefore no laughing matter.

Nasty rumors could be circulating, by people who read this book carefully, that I have some kind of quarrel with the airlines and the airports. Not true. Some of my best friends spend time in them. I have even met all kinds of nice people who work for them. And I am in awe of their operating logistics and safety records. No, my quarrel is with commercialism, this assumption that we must all be consumed by consumption.

I know that we live in the third millennium. I know that everything is a product and everybody is a market. I know that all human values must be reduced to Shareholder Value. But in churches? Gambling casinos? Ping-pong tournaments? When I discovered that this was happening in the skies too, so close to the heavens, that was it. I sought my revenge. You are holding it in your hands.

Another rumor could be circulating, started by bookmakers and booksellers intent on feeding their children (lavishly), that you are holding in your hands a book of humor. How can it be, when this is a book about the consequences of Management? Management is a serious business. I know, because down on the ground I write serious books about Management. This is not one of them. (But if you are a Manager in need of help, I suggest that you read everything in this book carefully and then do the opposite.)

If you are a consumer, you might be tempted to laugh at what follows. Feel free—just so long as you don't do so at the expense of the airlines and airports. For this is not a book about what they do to us. It is a book about what we do to each other.

But please, laugh quietly. The person in the seat next to you is probably a Manager arranging your next purchase. Indeed, the person in your own seat may be a Manager too, arranging my next purchase. But that is only fair, because the person in my seat has just managed to arrange your last purchase.

OK, now fasten your eyes and prepare for this fight of fancy. Bon voyage!

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Remember that old saying you probably never heard of, that you can't turn a sow's ear into a silk purse? Maybe it's true. (I never tried.) But let me tell you, airlines are masters at turning cattle into sardines.

If you want to fly somewhere, you must start by being herded, every which way. First you have to stand in line to get a boarding pass. That is to replace the ticket they just sold you. Then you have to stand in line to show your boarding pass. That is to prove you bought the ticket they just took away from you. Next you have to stand in line to give back the boarding pass they just gave you. This done, you get to stand in line to get on the plane, which gets you to stand in line to go down the plane.

Eventually you spot your place in the pen, jammed up against the window. But first you must stand in line one last time while this airhead in front of you takes an interminable time to arrange his trunk overhead. Finally,

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your way is clear. All you have to do is arrange your own trunk overhead. It won't take but a minute. And now some featherhead is glaring at you from behind.

At this point, flying becomes a transformational experience. After performing several feats that could land you a job in the circus, you squeeze into your place, utterly transformed: legs locked together, knees tucked up, arms clamped tightly by your sides—because this bonehead next to you is hogging your armrest. (Isn't it supposed to be good fences, rather than single armrests, that make for good neighbors?)

But never mind. You have found your corner of the can. Even if you do feel as if your head and tail have been cut off. Not skinless and boneless, mind you, because this is not a classy place to be. You must never forget that you are in steerage, which the airlines call "Economy Class." But if it looks like a sardine and squashes like a sardine, shouldn't we really be calling it Sardine Class?

Now it's the plane's turn to stand in line: first to leave the gate, then to take its place among the dozens of other planes waiting to "take off." Finally, as you clasp your cross, star, or economics book to your breast, this winged can races along the ground like some sort of confused bird trying to hurl itself into the air. Thus you become airborne, relieved only by the thought that if it worked for Wilbur and Orville Wright, more or less, it will probably work for you.

At this point, I suggest you take a walk. (Ignore those "Seatbelt" signs; they are for people not used to

Flying as a Transformational Experience

walking downhill.) This will offer a sight like none you will ever see on the face of the earth: every version of the human race—great-uncles and grand-nieces, trophy and garbage collectors, ostrich breeders and orchestra conductors—all preciously lined up in their neat orderly rows. It's enough to make a sardine can look like a disco.

On the ground, when people talk to each they stand closer in some cultures, farther away in others. Anthropologists like to study these things. Except on airplanes. Did you ever meet an anthropologist doing research on an airplane? This is because no culture on earth has ever produced an anthropologist willing to work that close.

Happy herding

During the final days at Denver's Old Stapleton airport, a crowded United flight was cancelled. A single agent was rebooking a long line of inconvenienced travelers. Suddenly an angry passenger pushed his way to the desk. He slapped his ticket down on the counter and said, "I HAVE to be on this flight and it has to be FIRST CLASS."

The agent replied, "I'm sorry sir, I'll be happy to try to help you, but I've got to help these folks first, and I'm sure we'll be able to work something out."

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The passenger was unimpressed. He asked loudly, so that the passengers behind him could hear, “Do you have any idea who I am?”

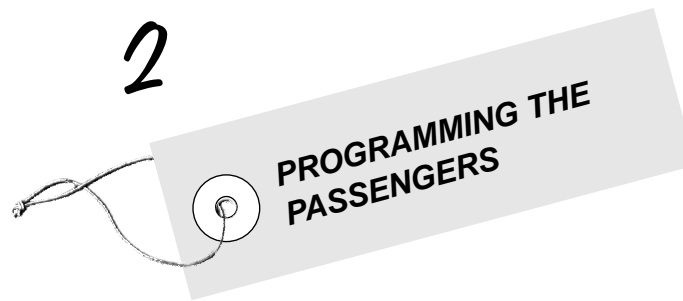
Without hesitating, the gate agent smiled and grabbed her public address microphone. “May I have your attention please?” she began, her voice bellowing throughout the terminal. “We have a passenger here at the gate WHO DOES NOT KNOW WHO HE IS. If anyone can help him find his identity, please come to the gate.”

With the folks behind him in line laughing hysterically, the man glared at the United agent, gritted his teeth and swore “[Expletive] you.”

Without flinching, the agent smiled and said, to the loud applause of the other passengers, “I’m sorry, sir, but you’ll have to stand in line for that, too.”

(Appears widely on the Internet; original source unknown.)

2



Once up here, beyond the clouds, our every need is looked after. Whether we need it or not. Except for one thing—at least for those of us sitting by the window and tired of the acrobatic routine. This is not a problem on flights from Buda to Pest. Longer ones are another matter.

The airlines do provide cute little white bags for those of us going the other way. Trouble is, with one exception I shall get to, so far as I can tell, no one has used one of these bags since the jet airplane was introduced in 1952. Some people believe those little white bags provide reassurance. Like the landing gear, I suppose. We'll get to that, too.

Everything else up here takes place on cue. Somebody is pressing the buttons down at head office. As the plane leaves the gate, a flight attendant at the front of the cabin performs some kind of ritualistic dance on cue, which everyone else ignores on cue. This is accompanied by an

The Flying Circus

announcement in a strange language known only to the airline people:

“Welcome aboard this Air Bla Bla flight from Budato Pest with stops in Pune and Perth . . .”

Then the drinks come by, on cue, three pieces of ice dropped into each cup, on cue, cue, cue. “Can I have the can?” you can ask. Later, a tray drops before you, on cue, on which something they claim to be food is placed. You eat it, on cue.

Some time later, the lights dim on cue and the Entertainment appears, on a little screen on the horizon. This is yours to enjoy through the head of the basketball player sitting in front of you. The sound is beamed to you, more or less on cue, through earphones designed especially for the airlines by Alexander Graham Bell himself.

First are The Exercises, to relieve the tension. Bending fingers. Knotting stomachs. Opening nostrils (in search of air). The movie follows, during which everyone laughs several dozen times on cue, cue, cue, etc., without uttering a sound. We are quite the sight, we hundreds of human sardines sitting there responding like Skinner pigeons.

Finally the movie ends, with assurances that everyone will live happily ever after. That is the cue for all the aisle people and the acrobats to leap up and line up at the loo. This can of cans has been empty for three hours.

Programming the Passengers

One thing in all of this must happen off cue (although just as it's your turn at the loo). If the airplane encounters the slightest breeze, “Your Captain” is obliged to say: “We are passing through a zone of turbulence. Would you kindly return to your seats, fasten your seatbelts, and put your seatbacks to their most awkward position.” It is at this point that 479 clicks follow in perfect unison, on cue. You have just experienced The Airline Salute.

One announcement worth listening to

“Hello and Welcome to Alaska Flight 438 to San Francisco. If you're going to San Francisco, you're in the right place. If you're not going to San Francisco, you're about to have a really long evening. We'd like to tell you now about some important safety features of this aircraft. The most important safety feature we have aboard this plane is The Flight Attendants. Please look at one now.

“There are five exits aboard this plane: two at the front, two over the wings, and one out of the plane's rear end. . . . Please take a moment and look around and find the nearest exit. Count the rows of seats between you and the exit. In the event that the need arises to find one, trust me, you'll be glad you did. . . .”

“In the event of a loss of cabin pressure these baggy things will drop down over your head. You

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stick it over your nose and mouth like the flight attendant is doing now. The bag won't inflate, but there's oxygen there, I promise. If you are sitting next to a small child, or someone who is acting like a small child, please do us a favor and put on your mask first. If you are traveling with two or more children, please take a moment now to decide which one is your favorite. Help that one first and then work your way down.

"In the seat pocket in front of you is a pamphlet about the safety features of this plane. I usually use it as a fan when I'm having my own personal summer. . . . Please take it out and play with it now.

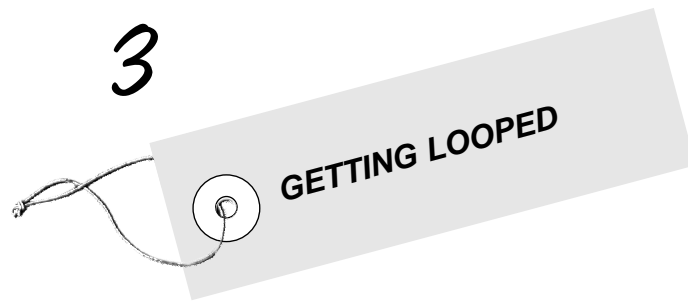
"Please take a moment now to make sure your seat belts are fastened low and tight about your hips. To fasten the belt, insert the metal tab into the buckle. To release, it's a pulley thing—not a pushy thing like your car, because you're in an airplane—HELLO!!

"There is no smoking in the cabin on this flight. There is also no smoking in the lavatories. If we see smoke coming from the lavatories, we will assume you are on fire and put you out. This is a free service we provide. There are two smoking sections on this flight, one outside each wing exit. We do have a movie in the smoking sections tonight. . . . hold on, let me check what it is. . . . Oh here it is. . . . the movie tonight is 'Gone With the Wind.' . . .

Programming the Passengers

"We're glad to have you with us on board this flight. Thank you for choosing Alaska Air, and giving us your business and your money. . . . If you weren't strapped down you would have given me a standing ovation, wouldn't you?"

(Appears widely on the Internet; original source unknown.)



Ahhh, you say, why put up with all this herding and squeezing? Someone else is probably paying, so why not go Business Class? Be a zillionaire sardine.

Did you ever open one of those fancy cans? Do you really believe a sardine feels better just because it's going at several times the price? They may look elegant, all those little fish sitting there in their olive oil. But please be assured they are no happier.

In fact, Business Class is a confusing label. Thanks to the heroic efforts of the airlines themselves, Business Class has become more than just a place in an airplane. So once again, let's call it as it quacks: Pampered Class. The objective is to treat you disgustingly well. This must be to alleviate their guilt. They refer to it as Customer Service. Customer Service is when they smile at you in the plane while trying to squeeze more money out of you at head office. I long for customer service.

At this point, I must make one thing perfectly clear. Flying for me is damage control. Like buying gasoline; worse still, like refilling the stapler. Just get it over with as quickly and as painlessly as possible. All I want to do in an airplane is vegetate, which, for me, means to read uninterrupted.

“Excuse me, sir, your Alexander Graham Bell earphones.” . . . “Pardon me, sir, we have these duty-free gold-plated gumdrops.” . . . “Sir, your very own teddy bear.”¹

Now they have a new twist. Computers have Personalized the service. Subliminal cue cards have been submerged electronically in the brains of the flight attendants. “Excuse me, Mr. Mintzberg, your Chateau Chirac 1943.” . . . “More Velveeta, Mr. Mintzberg?” . . . “Your coloring book, Mr. Mintzberg.” Peace and quiet, Mr. Mintzberg? No, never peace and quiet for Mr. Mintzberg. They are Mistermintzberging me to death. One day I am going to register as Mr. Jackass.

Why don't they just leave me alone? I once asked this profound question of an Air Kanuk flight attendant sitting next to me, “deadheading” home. She was quite

1. Because you may be getting the impression that I am inclined to exaggerate, let me say that I exaggerate least when I seem to do so the most. Stories about flying require no exaggeration, believe me. Blimey Airways used to run an ad campaign showing an adult's head over a child's body, tucked into one of their gargantuan seats, with a teddy bear by its side. This is you and me, ladies and gentlemen, in the mind of some marketing manager.

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polite about it (although she refused to give back my armrest). “But we’re told to do this,” she pleaded. “It’s called ‘looping.’”

Looping! They have a name for it. I’ve been looped all these years! I’ll bet I could sue them for breach of privacy. There must be freedom from expression somewhere off this world.

Think about it. Fully grown adult human beings are sitting in offices and being paid to arrange such things. First give him a drink. Hand him the headphones next. Then the nuts, don’t forget the nuts. A few minutes later, more nuts. Another drink? Then the menu (nuts). . . . And they refer to those poor flight attendants simply trying to get home as deadheading.

I asked Louis about looping. Louis is a marketing professor at our place who used to work for Air Kanuk. “But the passengers like looping,” Louis lamented. “They have all kinds of Marketing Research to prove it.” (We’ll get to Marketing Research too.)

But how much looping do they like, Louis? I mean, is this like happiness—insatiable? Where does looping end and pestering begin?

More to the point, where does Managing end and thinking begin? This kind of stuff may be great for the maintenance department. They have engines in there—delicate creatures in need of the gentlest of care. But up here, in the sky, we are real people. Hey, gang, we live and breathe up here. Or at least, we try to. Give us a break. (You know what I mean.)

Getting Looped

Look, I have an idea: Treat me like cargo. Isn’t that why you have Marketing—to think of me like cargo? So why can’t you treat me like cargo? Just get me from A to B without damage. Why can’t we passengers get that kind of respect?

There is this joke about a guy who says to his wife, “If you don’t leave me alone, I’ll find someone else who will.” Take heed, airlines.

They get treated like cargo

(from *Flight* magazine, 15 October 1954)

The carriage of livestock by air by British airlines has expanded so greatly that recently B.O.A.C.² claimed “one in every seven passengers has four feet.” Last year the Corporation carried 50,000 animals as against 305,000 human beings. The proportion would have been higher if birds, fish, and reptiles had been included. Monkeys, birds, and tropical fish are the most common travelers.

Sometimes as many as 5,000 monkeys are carried in a flight, most of them bound for United States zoos and research laboratories. B.E.A. carries a heavy traffic in goldfish from Bologna, Italy, and in dogs from all over Europe. From time to time it flies

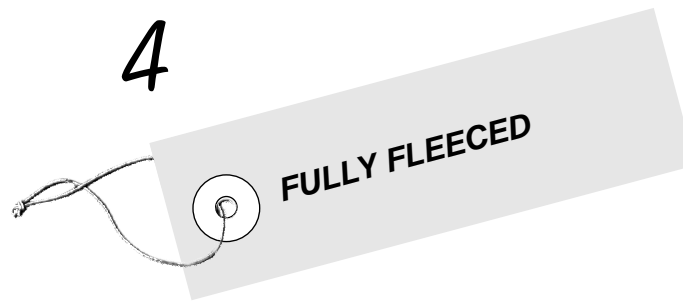
2. B.O.A.C. (British Overseas Airways Corporation) and B.E.A. (British European Airways) were merged to form British Airways in 1974.

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circus animals and does a regular run from the South of France with leeches for London hospitals.

On more than one occasion animals and birds have been known to keep airline attendants busy. On one recent Saturday afternoon B.E.A. landed ten penguins at Northolt and found that the birds could not be delivered until Monday. Over the weekend two ctw of fish were fed to the penguins—and every single fish had to be tossed into the air before the fastidious creatures would eat it.

(Flight Magazine, 15 October 1954; reprinted in Flight International, 19 October 2004.)



Why go Pampered Class? If not for the looping, then what for? The food, you say? We'll bring that up soon enough. The status? Just because Virginal Airways calls it "Upper Class"? The space—the fact that the armrests are several meters wide? You think that ensures a good night's sleep? (We'll get to that too.) Or that it avoids the acrobatic routine? By the time the guy in front of you has dropped his seat back 196 degrees and the gal next to you has positioned her television at 87 degrees, all you can do is lie back and dream about the wonders of Sardine Class (where the seats go back $1 \frac{3}{8}$ inches).

In the meantime, the burning question: How much does this particular "good night's sleep" really cost?

Not much, in fact. Have you ever noticed that a Pampered Class ticket costs only \$1.75 more than one in Sardine Class? Well, OK, I'm really referring to what they call "Full-Fare Economy," which should really be called

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“Full-Fleece Economy.” Alice says that it serves as the perfect introduction to the wonderland of airline pricing.

Full-Fleece Economy is a fare that has been especially developed for people who have suddenly lost a distant relative. Who else would buy it? If you stay over a Saturday night or are chummy with a travel agent or promise to sit still—in other words, if you do almost anything conceivable except claim that your family pit bull died yesterday—you get a discount.¹

And I mean a discount! Good thing that poor guy without the pit bull is too upset to speak to his neighbors. He might discover that he paid more than they did. I mean more than *all* of them—across the entire row. Here he sits, fighting over an armrest with his travel agent’s niece, whose ticket was purchased with the commission earned on his.

Lest you think I could be exaggerating, let me quote some real figures. (These are a few years old, so please multiply by ten.) They prove, beyond any doubt, that I am exaggerating far less than the airlines themselves.

Montreal to Paris, round trip, Air Kanuk (in U.S.):

Pampered Class	\$3,256
Full-Fleece Economy	\$2,654

1. Some airlines do give discounts to those who have lost distant relatives. But only if they are distant only in distance. And many do not tell the passengers, before they leave, how much they are saving. More anxiety: this “Compassionate Refund” comes later. So be careful who dies, and where.

Fully Fleeced

Cheapest Sardine Class \$572

(Charters are cheaper; sales are cheaper by the dozen)

Same plane, same route, same air (but less of it); almost six times the price in Pampered Class, even if you do arrive several micro-seconds earlier.

OK, so the food in Pampered Class is better. Not good, just better. But do you need that food in any class? I recently flew from Prague to Geneva and back Full-Fleece Economy, big-shot airline, for \$1,495. A friend flew from Prague to Frankfurt to Philadelphia to Los Angeles to Fort Lauderdale to Orlando to Philadelphia to Frankfurt and back to Prague for \$933. If there was a discount airline between Prague and Geneva, I could have done that flight in one hour for about \$100. Two lunches—those lunches!—plus some peanuts, for \$1,395. You decide.

So what’s a guy without a pit bull to do? Easy: stay home. For the same expenditure, he can have more time with his bereaved family: 1,105 hours, 38 minutes, and 51.4 seconds, to be exact. On the telephone. And he gets to stretch out his legs into the bargain.

Now you begin to get an idea of what that good night’s sleep really costs. Rather pricey, if you can sit still. But what’s the point of belonging to the world’s newest class if you can’t get a couple of hours of sleep for a few thousand bucks?

If you spend your spare time reading the speeches of airline executives, you will have discovered that this is the

The Flying Circus

age of competition: fierce competition, turbulent markets, the horrors of deregulation. How can the airlines cope?

Easy. As a kid, did you ever go to summer camp? Take a swim in the lake? Remember how, when they blew the whistle, everyone had to find their buddy and hold up hands to prove they didn't drown? Well, the airlines have been doing much the same thing in recent years. Except that when these guys hold up hands, it is with the intention of swimming in black ink, not drowning in red.

In the flying business, buddies are called "Partners." When the Partners stand in a great big circle and hold up their hands all around the world, it's called an "Alliance." An Alliance is like a gang—a set of "best friends" who hang out together. These gangs roam the skies, not the streets. The members share reservation systems, they go shopping together for engines, combine points, lose luggage—that sort of thing. Keeps the globe safe for the big guys.

Sometimes they even share airplanes, and passengers. You never know whose plane you'll find yourself on (or off, if you read your ticket correctly and went to the wrong terminal; Simon Caulkin wrote in a review of this book in *The Observer*, ". . . because a partner flight was late, I once had the astoundingly surreal experience of missing the 'direct' flight I was already on"). You're booked on Air Feather but you find yourself flying on Air Lead. "But the ads say that Air Feather has a light touch," you protest. "I don't need the solid friendship promised by Air Lead. I took a marketing course once. They told me

Fully Fleeced

that branding is important. So I read every ad religiously, and then select my suppliers with the utmost care."

"Can I see your passport?" they reply.

If you have been following the prices lately, you will have noticed another interesting thing. They have been racing downward. Yes. This is the result of this fierce competition you have been reading about. Every airline has one dastardly competitor against which it competes viciously: itself.

Sometimes it even creates another airline to do so—a pretend "discount" airline. You can tell a real discount airline by its name, which is serious—like Southwesterly, or Riot Air, better still, Hard Jet. You can tell a pretend discount airline created by a pretend profit airline by its name too—like Ted, and Tango, Jazz, and Song. (No need to make these up!) Why don't they just call them all Cutesy Airlines and be done with it.

But no need to go this far to lose money efficiently. The old airline will do. With a "Technique." (A Technique is something you can use instead of a brain.) This one is called "Yield Management." Think of it as high-tech scalping. Except that the objective is for the airlines to scalp themselves. They have to fill every single seat—at any price.

As soon as an empty seat comes up, the hawking begins. No seat must go unfilled. When the airplane finally takes off, 479 seats may well be going at 479 different prices, from \$4.79 to \$4,790. I heard a story about a kid

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who was delivering flowers to a gate agent in Idaho. He used his tip to go to India.

But all this is small potatoes. If these guys really want to fix up their poor old bottom lines, I have an idea that will save them billions. Maybe they'll pass a few pennies of it on to us. A modest illustration will explain.

The other day, I booked a seat at the opera. I called after the performance. "I booked a seat at the ballet too," I said. "I didn't feel like going to the opera." "No problem," they replied. "Please feel free to do this again. We appreciate your money, and especially not having to clean up your popcorn."

"Hey, wait a minute," I cried. "You kept my money? You people don't even give miles."

Same problem when I book a hotel room. They actually expect me to show up. I can't even get away with this on the train. So why do airlines let me book to my heart's content, at least Full-Fleece and above, without having to buy a ticket or even show up?

Simple. It's all for me. Another form of *Customer Service*. If I need to fly to Come by Chance, Newfoundland, I can book nine seats on each of eight airlines at each of seven different times. Take my choice.

Except for a few incidental details. I can't get half the reservations I won't honor because everyone else is doing the same thing. Indeed, the reason I have to book so many seats is that everyone else is booking so many seats. Then there's the overbooking, followed by the

Fully Fleeced

bumping. The more the airlines bump, the more we passengers have to book. The circle is vicious indeed. You see, we fleece ourselves, we poor passengers.

I really want to go on Flighty Airways' midnight express. But it's fully booked. I can't risk it, even though I know it will fly half empty. So I have settled for Air Chance at noon, and have rescheduled my meeting. Let's see, that meeting will probably end about 9:15, and given the fifteen-minute ride to the airport, with all that herding, I should be OK for the 12 o'clock. I'd better make a backup booking or two: on the 12:15 and the 12:30 flights. The 12:45 too, just in case. But I have to be careful. These guys might have computers. They could cross-check and then cancel all my reservations. Computers are smart; I must be even smarter. I know, I'll book the 12:00 as Mr. Jackass, the 12:15 as Mr. Jakass, the 12:30 as Mr. Jackas, and the 12:45 as Mr. Jerkass. If they don't believe it's me, I can always claim that their donkey of an agent on the phone speld my name wrong.

Long lines. I make it to the gate at 12:28. Mustn't miss the 12:30, or else I will have to wait for the 12:45. No problem, they say. The 12:30 flight is not going to leave before 2:30. A little rearranging to be done. Over-booking, you know.

"Calm down, everybody," I hear. "This is an airport, a proper place. You are all waiting to fly—maybe. Why on earth should you be so anxious? Now, many of you will have to wait for the next available flight—on Friday. As for the lucky few with boarding cards, we are offering, as

The Flying Circus

compensation for flying next week, a complimentary excursion to the ice floes, where you can pet the poor seals. In Newfoundland, passengers and seals understand each other. We have dozens of members of our staff here for no other purpose than to sort all this out.”

I amble up to the agents. “My name is Mr. Jackass,” I bray haughtily. “I fly a lot.” “Yes, we know,” they reply. “We hear you are writing a book about why you hate flying, Mr. Jackas.” (They pronounce it Jack-az.) “Believe us, we have more reason to write this book than you, Mr. Jackas,” they say, convincingly. “We have rebooked you next month. In return, you get a free trip to Harbour Harbour, Newfoundland. One week long. Unless you’d prefer two weeks in Toronto.” (Their computer knows I’m from Montreal.)

“This is outrageous,” I say. “You can see my bona fide booking right there on your screen. Why, your donkey of an agent has even misspelled my name. How can you have the nerve to give my seat—*my very own seat*—to some stranger? And while we’re at it, let me tell you, your prices are outrageous. Just look at all your people hanging around negotiating changes. All because *you* overbooked. If *you* kept *my* seat for *me*, you wouldn’t need all these people, and think of all the money we would save. Next time I go to Newfoundland, I shall take the train. Better still, I shall stay home and go to the opera. *Those* people never give away my seat. Take that!”

You should have seen those agents quiver. Not just because I am so terrifying. Those agents quiver from the

Fully Fleeced

day they take that job. They never stop quivering until they are carried out to the hospitals and asylums, while another set of agents is being led in. But Air Chance doesn’t care. Back at Headquarters, it’s all perfectly calm. No overbooking in the boardroom.

Now how on earth (I hope you are asking yourself) could those smart people who run the airlines have gotten themselves into such a mess: multiple reservations, overbooked flights, empty reserved seats, delayed planes, extra gate staff, anxious passengers, last-minute negotiations, free compensation trips, terrifying Jackasses, quivering agents, and nervous breakdowns, not to mention trashed boarding cards? (I shall let you figure that one out for yourself. Hint: read Chapters 1 to 3, 4, 5 to 11, 14, and 15.) But there is a solution: replace all those financial wizards who run the airlines with people who have managed real companies: opera houses.

Fleecing the little lady

[One airline] recently introduced a special half-fare rate for wives accompanying their husbands on business trips. Anticipating some valuable testimonials, the publicity department of the airline sent out letters to all the wives of businessmen who used the special rates, asking how they enjoyed their trip.

Responses are still pouring in asking, “What trip?”

(Appears widely on the Internet; original source unknown.)

The Flying Circus

Some little ladies fly with a sense of humor

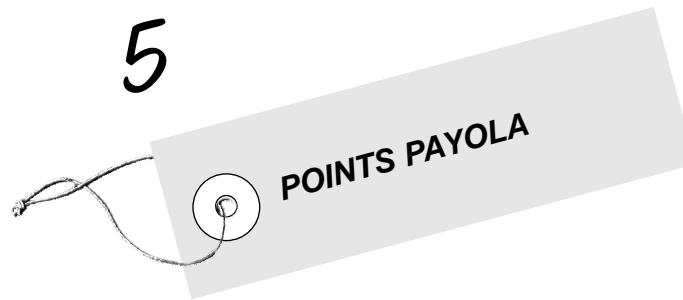
My wife, a flight attendant for a major airline, watched one day as a passenger overloaded with bags tried to stuff his belongings in the overhead bin of the plane. Finally, she informed him that he would have to check the oversized luggage.

“When I fly other airlines,” he said irritably, “I don’t have this problem.”

My wife smiled, “When you fly other airlines, I don’t have this problem either.”

(Appears widely on the Internet; original source unknown.)

5



We're not done with pricing just yet. Don't forget the points—the "miles." No problem: the airlines never let you forget them. No sooner do you get off one plane than they're looping you in the mails about how to get you on another. You'd think they'd be smart enough to keep quiet. Or at least to offer you a ride on a train.

But no. Barbara wrote to me. "Dear Dr. Mintzberg," she started sweetly enough. "We're a bit puzzled. On one hand, we know that you enjoy the comforts and high level of personal service you receive when flying [Blimey] Airways. [Read the book, Barbara.] On the other hand, we can't figure out why you're not flying [Blimey] Airways across the Atlantic." Think of it this way, Barbara: I haven't been going to London lately. I refuse to fly to Paris via London just for the sake of your British food.

But I don't think Barbara understood, because she

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offered me—yes, me—“**Double miles on [Blimey] Airways—across the Atlantic and all over the world!**” (This is Barbara’s bold face.) Wowee! “It’s almost beyond belief!” the very expensive accompanying card said. Almost.

But maybe Barbara did understand, because when she claimed to “look forward to seeing [me] on board soon,” I took the bait. I raced out to get those double miles to London, and then on to Paris. But where was Barbara? I was stuck with that British food and no Barbara in sight.

Now, let’s take a good look at this points business. Whenever anyone tries to bribe you with your own money, watch out. It’s a sure sign that you’re being overcharged. After all, someone has to be paying for all those fancy brochures, all the Barbaras with their **bold faces**, all those people not answering the phones—not to mention a mite left over for the line at the bottom. If they really wanted to give you back your money, wouldn’t they simply write you a check and be done with it?

Something else must be going on here. Now to those of you who fly on business, and are so very sensitive, this is going to come as a terrible shock. Please, brace yourselves. *They are not bribing you with your own money at all.* There, I said it.

Today, we call it points. In an earlier incarnation, it was called “payola.” Now, it is business as usual. Back then, it was scandal. Payola was the label pegged on radio disk jockeys who took money from recording companies in exchange for playing their releases. Imagine that: One party taking a reward from a second party for spending a

Points Payola

third party’s money. Like accepting a bottle of whisky from a supplier at Christmas. Or a few dollars from an interest group to run an election campaign. Unthinkable.

So unthinkable, in fact, that even the tax collectors—hardly slouches when it comes to the laying-on of hands—are afraid to touch this one. Is it because they fly too? Or because you just don’t mess with the Business Class?

But wait a minute. “It’s not like that,” I am told by legions of people who have been well rehearsed on this issue. They have concocted a wonderful explanation for points payola. It goes like this: It is such a hardship to fly, so disagreeable to be away from the family you hardly know, frolicking in France instead of doing the dishes in Des Moines, that points are the least you deserve.

Now, beats me where anyone gets this idea that flying isn’t fun. Even so, would not this world be a better place if these poor travelers were properly compensated by their employers instead of being bribed by their suppliers? That way, they could at least trade up their BMWs for proper Lamborghinis. Maybe even find a cheaper flight on another airline now and again.

While personally waiting to be so purified, I have accumulated zillions of points, as you might imagine. But they have not corrupted me, simply because I never get around to using them. I am too busy flying—on other people’s money.

I did try once, years ago. I asked Air Gaul for a tiny little upgrade on a flight to India. Mumbai is a long way from Paris, and because I was staying over a month of

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Saturdays, could book decades in advance, am chummy with my travel agent, and usually sit still, I got a really good deal in Sardine Class. I could hardly have found a taxi to Versailles at a cheaper price. Finally, I could use some of those points to sit where, by then, I should have become accustomed to sitting. So I called Air Gaul.

Calling Air Gaul is almost a chapter until itself (coming next). Eventually, I reached a Mme. Ratched. She's the sister of that nurse in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. I told her about going to India, and about sitting where I should have become accustomed. "That will cost you 50,000 miles," she said, adding, I am sure with a smirk on her face, "One way." Yes, 50,000 miles was what they wanted back then just for a few hours in their Pampered Class. Think of it this way: I had to fly 80 million meters in order to walk eight meters forward in one of their cabins. Needless to say, I kept all my points. But for what reason, I cannot say.

Actually I can: Kate, my personal assistant until she flew into public relations. Kate used my points with great glee. She didn't mind the restrictions. Like having to fly on Friday the thirteenth. Kate once flew from Montreal to Bangor, Maine, via Detroit, then Boston, and finally Portland (actually Maine, not Oregon). No kidding. It took her eight hours. Kate could not have walked that fast.

As I accumulated all these points, I advanced in the Great Airlines Sweepstakes. I used to be Tin on one airline. As I flew, I moved up—to Bronze, Silver, Gold, finally Diamond. When I graduated from Gold to

Points Payola

Diamond, a military band was dispatched to my office to play "Diamond is a Passenger's Best Friend."

Those were the good old days. Modest. We have moved on since then. In the ever-escalating war of woolly words, we now have Prestige and Elite, Fat Cat and Top Dog, even Chairman's Preferred (I'll bet!). As the categories have become finer and the exaggerations coarser, the marketing people have had to scour all twenty volumes of the *Oxford English Dictionary* for words that have yet to be contaminated. Accordingly, I recently received the following letter:

Dear Mr. Jackass:

You will be enthralled to discover that your latest flight from Buda to Pest has elevated you from Majesty to Maharajah. This gives you the privilege of skipping customs and immigration altogether, as well as riding into each flight on top of a properly adorned elephant. Please be assured that the elephant will be installed in the seat next to you—we have asked it to be as polite as possible and have given it an especially large little white bag—so that you can mount right up there to ride off the flight in the manner to which you became accustomed riding on. Should you add another 80 million millimeters to your record, that will put you in the Pharaoh category, which enables you to remain in your living room, properly encased, while we bring wherever you wish to go directly to you.

Glowingly,

Air Image.

The Flying Circus

With or without points

“I’m convinced the only people who like to fly are those who don’t.”

(Ken Hicks, President of J.C. Penney, who flies a lot.)

Questions from an “infrequent flyer”

“Since I am an infrequent flyer, I have several questions that may seem a bit naïve but still cry out for answers. Do 7:47 and 7:27 planes fly at any other times? Can I exchange my round-trip ticket for one that is rectangular so that it fits better on my carry-on bag? Does the overhead storage cover one’s eyes? If I fly a DC 10 can I still use my AC razor? Isn’t it dangerous to make sure the passengers are loaded before take off? If I happened to be in the Head when the ‘Fasten Seat Belt’ sign comes on, can my wife do it for me? My wife wants to know if a mudpack can be substituted for an oxygen mask? Should I bring my own in-flight meal if I’m allergic to pretzels and peanuts?”

(Lee Murdock, a Grand Forks, ND, man who took second place in a national contest of funny true stories about flying.)

Ready for a break?

WE INTERRUPT THIS DIATRIBE TO BRING YOU

ANA

A SHORT STORY ABOUT WHY I LOVE FLYING

Two shoes in sight. One black, shiny. The other brown, scruffy. No sock visible above the black shoe. A white sock above the scruffy one—well, slightly gray really, washed too many times. Beyond this, black leather pants, maybe a little too chic, stretched out next to old, frayed jeans. Nothing else to report, short of stealing a sideways glance.

A sideways glance. Not to establish gender. That has already been done by all concerned (him, and hopefully you, not her).

She reads a book, in Spanish, highlighting like mad. What in Spanish can possibly be so interesting? He scribbles madly, a story about sighting two shoes. ¡Now that's interesting! Still no face clearly in sight. Still the intrigue, though.

Take-off. More sideways glances. She puts a fancy metal clip on her page and closes the book. He tried one of those decades ago—she was probably not yet even in diapers—but the page always tore. Then she rolls the other way and goes to sleep. Ah, tired, probably depressed. Or maybe just stayed up to watch some dumb late-night movie.

He puts down his pen—or at least intends to after finishing this sentence—to fetch his bag, there to find some proper paper. Better than having to write this on the back of some other story.

Done. Maneuvered forth and back. From that angle, a sock has been revealed. Sheer, gray. Could that mean it was not a late-night movie after all? He has stepped delicately over the outstretched pants, the shiny shoes, the sheer socks. All in Row One. Come to think of it, why is she flying Business Class from Toronto to Montreal? He, after all, has an excuse. Just came in from Tokyo, Business Class. So they put him here. Ah so, maybe she has come in from Rio. Anything but Toronto.

He would have preferred to bump that shoe. “Oh, I am ever so sorry. Do you come from Rio? What in Spanish [OK, Portuguese] could possibly

be so interesting? I’m writing a story about us.” But no, he’s too polite. Well, let’s call it that. Anyway, he doesn’t want to find out that it was that late-night movie after all.

Things are happening now. A trolley goes by, oblivious to the drama unfolding here. He asks for water. They each get a little bowl of mixed nuts. He digs in. You already know about his resistance to temptation, at least when it can’t talk back. So while he feasts, worrying about gaining weight, she sleeps, worrying about. . . . But that is the very point: What does she worry about? Is it worth his worrying about? Can it possibly be as important as his gaining weight? All he currently knows for certain is that she doesn’t know what she’s missing in that little bowl.

Now what?

She stirs, that’s what. Problems in Rio? Back to sleep. But no, she’s up. Tries a nut. Yawns. Another nut. Apparently can’t resist temptation either. Asks for water, in what sounds like normal English. So much for Rio. Probably Hamilton.

They drink their respective waters. A big diamond appears on her little finger. Not entirely his kind of

woman. Come to think of it, the leather pants don't really go with the English.

He is just about to burst into conversation, finally ("You from Montreal?" so clever) when she picks up the airline magazine. Can't interrupt her now. But wait, Hamiltonians don't usually read Spanish, let alone Portuguese. They probably read airline magazines.

She puts it down. Better do something—the airplane is in descent. "Been cold a long time here?" he asks. (Now that's clever.)

He gets a groggy, "Excuse me?" Then the profundity of it sinks in. "Sorry, I don't know; I'm not from here." The English is accented.

"Where are you from?"

"Brazil," she says. No kidding. She has just said Brazil!

Now he's allowed to look. Rather pretty, an interesting face. A clean, direct look. Doesn't go with the pants. Not in this hemisphere, at least. Older than he thought at first, second, third glance. Was probably in diapers after all.

He can't leave well enough alone. "Rio?"

"No, Brasilia," she says. Serves him right. He nonetheless recovers. "Is it as bad a place as they say?"

"No, not at all." She likes Brasilia.

Now they're flying. She was raised in Brasilia, one of the few. He asks why she has come here, what she does. Must always ask that damnable question. But this time the answer takes a funny form: "I follow my president around." "Oh." Then the possible triviality of it sinks in: not another MBA? No sooner has he left his world of management education than there appears yet another MBA.

But no, this time he's saved. Her President runs Brazil. She's a reporter for a big Brazilian television network. Her President is coming to Canada, so, so is she.

The snow on the ground surprises her. Him too, actually. Late April, up in this hemisphere, it should be spring. But the weather always does provide thirty million Canadians with something to talk about.

Soon she admits to escaping Brasilia for Rio or São Paulo every weekend. She loves Rio, she says. Just as he suspected all along: deep in their souls, that vital connection. He once spent three hours in

Rio, touring in a taxi between flights. He loved it too. Most unusual coincidence. Fate.

She's tired. Long trip. He tells her he's writing a book about why he hates flying. She says she reads in airplanes. He already knows that. Then she notices him scribbling madly.

"Are you writing a book?" she asks.

"No," he answers. "I'm writing a story."

Now here the conversation could have taken a serious turn. "Why must you write this now? Are you rude, uninterested, or just plain weird?" Then he would have had to say, "No, not entirely all of the above. I have no memory. If I don't get the conversation down immediately, I forget it. Could I ask you to speak a little more slowly, please." But no, she doesn't ask.

A flight attendant appears, bending down. Things are taking a serious turn after all. Apparently the shiny shoes were meant to grace the streets of Ottawa. That is, after all, where Presidents go. They ended up next to the scruffy ones by mistake. Plans are being hatched to get them to Ottawa.

"Montreal is a lot nicer place than Ottawa," he

tells her, maintaining the honesty of their relationship. He resists the temptation to add that it is sort of like Rio compared with Brasilia—and this, after all, is a weekend. Her President is not coming for a day or two, she admits, but still she wants to get to Ottawa.

Just as he always knew: no charm. Or is it no luck? Better still: no time. He should have interrupted that airline magazine after all. "Anyway, if you change your mind and want a lift to the city, let me know. My daughter is picking me up at the airport." See: such a nice family man.

Landing. That damnable flight attendant again: "We're going to get you off the plane first." So with a "Nice to meet you," she's gone. Just like that.

He passes the transit counter. She is deep in negotiation. He waits for his luggage, deep in mindlessness. Daughter arrives, claiming to be freshly in love.

Then she appears again, freshly rebooked. A brief word, a warm touch on his arm, and off she goes to find her bags. They wait respectively. Then he gets an idea(!). Writes his home number on a business card. His bags arrive, same time as hers.

Why I Love Flying

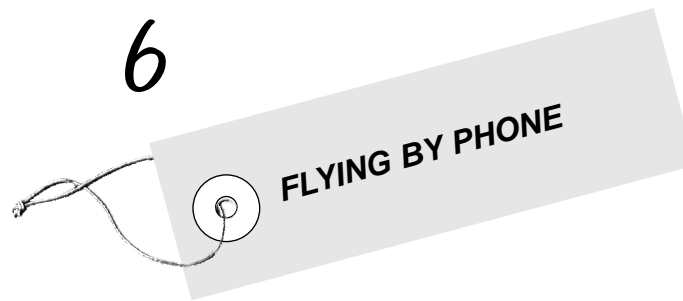
He hands her the card as he leaves: "If you run into any problem, give me a call." Especially if you don't. She takes it, smiles pleasantly and heads for the gate. Then, for no apparent reason, she turns around and calls back: "My name is Ana."

Beware of sideways glances

"(1) Do not shout at friends and family across the aisle; (2) Do not bore your seatmate by recounting your entire life history, and (3) No 'saucy canoodling' under the blankets." "If you get carried away [the manual warns], you could find yourself in court." Or in the maternity ward.

(Adapted from *The Jetiquette Manual*, attributed to British Airways.)

6



Back to that time I called Air Gaul about the miles. Calling the airlines can make flying seem like a breeze.

I did eventually get a human voice—after almost ten minutes. Well, sort of a human voice. The woman was not terribly interested in how long I had been waiting—it had been like this for four weeks, she said, as if that made it proper. Just then, I heard a beep on my phone. “Could you hold for just a moment, please?” I asked politely. “I have another call.” “No,” she said, and hung up.

So I wrote to Air Gaul. Their computer answered immediately. I was assured that “a great deal of planning goes into the staffing.” They “sincerely hope[d] that [they] may be privileged to serve [me] again and have a chance to prove that this experience was an exception.” Four weeks of exception.

It would have been callous of me to ignore such a nice offer, so I called back some time later. I was sick in bed at

The Flying Circus

the time, with not much else to do. Why not call Air Gaul's points people so that I could write back and say, "You were right—I waited only four milliseconds." Not quite. I got music, alternating with reassuring messages about how much they appreciate my business. One voice even said, "We are particularly busy at the moment." Finally I got another voice, at the eleven-minute mark, no kidding. "Please call back later," it said, and hung up, without so much as a chirpy little "Ciao!"

A glutton for punishment, I tried again a couple of years later, from San Diego. New time, new place, even a new message. But the same Air Gaul. "Your patience is very much appreciated," the voice said—30 times. (I counted.)

Things had improved, however, because I finally did get a real voice—at the 21-minute mark. (The things I do for research.) She was actually very nice. Almost worth the wait. The volume of calls had been especially high, she explained, and "A bunch of people are coming in from training next week." Phew. Thank goodness I called this week.

Corporations, you may have heard, make progress. It's the new millennium, and I am still trying to reach Air Gaul. This time it's about a bag of mine that has gone missing between Montreal and Prague, via Paris. The Air Gaul office in Prague cannot get any information, so I ask for the number in Paris. It answers immediately. The voice says that if I would like to report a lost bag, I should write Air Gaul a letter. It gives an

Flying by Phone

address and hangs up. It does not add: "While waiting for your bag, we suggest you eat cake."

Now that we are on—really off—bags, let me take you to North America, during the first summer of the new millennium, kind of a repeat of 476 AD, when the Huns, Vandals, and Goths were overrunning the Roman Empire. Anyone who loved flying was fully cured in this Summer of '00.

Air Kanuk, having just gobbled up its arch-rival, has become a near-monopoly in most of its northland. The shareholders are delighted—at least those who don't have to fly Air Kanuk (nor own a crystal ball).

I do have to fly Air Kanuk. And I don't own shares (as you might have guessed).

OK, so my bag didn't make it from Frankfurt to Montreal. These things happen. I fill out the form and go home. Trouble is, I have to fly to Toronto the next day, and I need to take something in that bag, but not the bag itself, not to Toronto and back. So I call Air Kanuk. I give up after 20 minutes, and take the advice of The Voice, which suggests that I call back before 9:00 am, when things are quieter. Duly jet-lagged, I call at 6:00 am. The Voice was right. I get a guy—after 30 minutes. "No problem" he said. "I'll mark your bag 'hold'; you come to the luggage door at the airport before your flight, pick up the phone there, and punch the Air Kanuk key. We'll come right out with your bag, you take what you need, and then we'll send it where you tell us." So simple.

The Flying Circus

I stand outside the door and punch Air Kanuk. One happy finger. One miserable me: ten minutes of punching and no answer. A guy walks by and laughs. “Still not answering?” he asks. “I gave up after ten minutes.” So do I. Better today’s plane than not yesterday’s luggage.

In Toronto, in between meetings, I call Santa (not Claus, Rodrigues, my assistant). She answers immediately. (If you have any questions about this book, do not call Santa. She will keep you on hold for months.)

“Save me,” I plead.

“What is it this time?” she queries. I tell her about my bag being on hold (not to mention the phone). “Can you extract it and have a courier deliver what I need in Toronto?”

Later, Santa calls back. She has given up after being held on hold for an hour and a half. (At this moment, I begin to develop an appreciation for Air Gaul.) Call the Big Cheese, I suggest. She does. His assistant (who must be named Claus) gets us the bag real quick. (Does she know about this book I am doing?)

The Big Cheese is actually aware of these problems—maybe because his airline is being featured on the media, day after day, horror story upon horror story. (One involved a plane that came in from China [reported in the *Globe and Mail*, August 5 2000] with sixteen happy families aboard, each with a newly adopted baby girl—a bunch of very small, very tired, and probably very traumatized baby girls who may not have entirely appreciated

Flying by Phone

the novelty of flying. Seventeen hours *en route*. And then, in Toronto, four more hours *en tarmac* before someone managed to get them to a gate. So sorry, they were told upon disembarking at 2:00 am, the baggage staff has gone home. Report tomorrow to pick up your clean diapers, etc. Stand outside that door, mommies and daddies, and pound Air Kanuk.)

Now why must there be any problem with phones these days? They can, after all, be connected to computers. Computers are smart; they have even learned how to speak. How I yearn for those hour-and-a-half holds:

Thank you for calling Air Wait. Please settle into a very soft chair with a very long drink.

[P-A-U-S-E]

- For service in English, touch £.
- Pour le service en français, appuyez sur le €.

[P-A-U-S-E]

- if you are calling about a ticket on which your name has been spelt incorrectly, please touch S-P-E-L-D-B-A-D.
- If you are calling about having to wait interminably for this line, please hold.

[Much later]

- Thank you for holding. That is kind of you. We hope you appreciate that our time is so much more

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- At the end of your message, press 1. [Screw you.]
- Beep. Beep. Beep, etc.
Beeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeep.
- Hello Paraphernalia. This is Jackass. Try leaving a message for yourself.
- Click. Ha!

No need to call if you buy the plane

An employee posted this on the website of a prominent manufacturer of military aircraft. (The company was apparently not amused.)

Thank you for purchasing a military aircraft. In order to protect your new investment, please take a few moments to fill out the warranty registration card below.

- | | |
|---|--|
| Please indicate the products that you currently own or intend to purchase in the near future: | <input type="checkbox"/> Killer satellite |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> CD player |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Air-to-air missiles |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Space shuttle |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Home computer |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Nuclear weapon |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Color TV | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> VCR | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> ICBM | |

Flying by Phone

How would you describe yourself or your organization?	Your occupation:
<input type="checkbox"/> Communist/socialist	<input type="checkbox"/> Homemaker
<input type="checkbox"/> Terrorist	<input type="checkbox"/> Sales/marketing
<input type="checkbox"/> Crazy	<input type="checkbox"/> Revolutionary
<input type="checkbox"/> Neutral	<input type="checkbox"/> Clerical
<input type="checkbox"/> Democratic	<input type="checkbox"/> Mercenary
<input type="checkbox"/> Dictatorship	<input type="checkbox"/> Tyrant
<input type="checkbox"/> Corrupt	<input type="checkbox"/> Middle management
<input type="checkbox"/> Primitive/tribal	<input type="checkbox"/> Eccentric billionaire
How did you pay for your product?	<input type="checkbox"/> Defense minister/general
<input type="checkbox"/> Deficit spending	<input type="checkbox"/> Retired
<input type="checkbox"/> Cash	<input type="checkbox"/> Student
<input type="checkbox"/> Suitcases of cocaine	To help us better understand our customers, please indicate the interests in which you and your spouse enjoy participating on a regular basis:
<input type="checkbox"/> Oil revenues	<input type="checkbox"/> Golf
<input type="checkbox"/> Personal check	<input type="checkbox"/> Sabotage
<input type="checkbox"/> Credit card	
<input type="checkbox"/> Ransom money	
<input type="checkbox"/> Traveler's check	

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<input type="checkbox"/> Boating/sailing	<input type="checkbox"/> Crushing rebellions
<input type="checkbox"/> Running/jogging	<input type="checkbox"/> Espionage/ reconnaissance
<input type="checkbox"/> Propaganda/ misinformation	<input type="checkbox"/> Fashion clothing
<input type="checkbox"/> Destabilization/ overthrow	<input type="checkbox"/> Border disputes
<input type="checkbox"/> Default on loans	<input type="checkbox"/> Mutually assured destruction
<input type="checkbox"/> Gardening	Thank you for taking the time to fill out this questionnaire. Your answers will allow you to receive mailings and special offers from other companies, governments, extremist groups, and mysterious consortia.
<input type="checkbox"/> Crafts	
<input type="checkbox"/> Black market/ smuggling	(Appears widely on the Internet; original source unknown.)
<input type="checkbox"/> Collectibles/ collections	
<input type="checkbox"/> Watching sports on TV	
<input type="checkbox"/> Wines	
<input type="checkbox"/> Interrogation/torture	
<input type="checkbox"/> Household pets	



How are we to know that we are getting Customer Service if we are not constantly being reminded of it? So here come the announcements—a kind of looping we cannot escape in any class. This is because announcements are cheap. Besides, what else has a Captain to do? Have a chat with the auto-pilot? Maybe it's just as well. We wouldn't want the airlines downsizing the pilots, would we?

In trains, they simply post things. But flying is an oral culture. The airlines have to say everything. If these people were running the railroads, they would be giving the conductors opera lessons so they could march up and down the aisles singing refrains from Gilbert and Sullivan: "Gentlemen will please refrain . . . from flushing toilets while the train . . . is standing in the station . . . We love you."

Or how about this one, which I quote precisely. Uncle Sam Airways trying to leave Philadelphia for

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Montreal. After “some last-minute lavatory problems we are trying to resolve” (he didn’t have to get *that* personal), Our Captain announced: “Another little delay. A little pin in the toe bar is broken in the tug that pushes us back. Maintenance informs me it will be about a three-minute delay. It’s a shear pin. From time to time it breaks.” So do my eardrums, Our Captain.

I once innocently flew Blimey Airways from Manchester to Paris, a flight that does not take quite as long as some of the immigration line-ups at the John F. Naughty Airport in New York. Between the announcements and the looping, I counted 25 interruptions. An average of one every three minutes! Divided Airways from San Diego to Chicago was not that bad, but for *four hours*. They used those boom LOUDspeakers, aimed directly at my eardrums. Time after time: “This is Your Captain screaming. . . .” When we finally got to Chicago, those things were red-hot (eardrums and speakers alike).

They don’t talk all the time, Our Captains. There are times when they keep perfectly quiet. Like those moments before landing, when there is that terrifying roar as the plane slows down. “Don’t stop here!” I yell out silently to myself. “Whatever you do, don’t stop here!” Never a murmur of reply from the flight deck.

The trick in dealing with this problem is not to have the airlines reduce the number of announcements, but to increase them, slightly, to the point where they never stop. In that way, no passenger need ever be interrupted again.

This Is Your Captain Screaming

All these announcements are carefully timed to catch as many of us as possible dozing off. “This is Your Captain screaming, yet again. You will be delighted to know that we are flying over Spearfish, South Dakota. If you look out the left side of the airplane, beneath the clouds, you will see the Spearfish gymnasium.”

Now think about this. In the smallest of commercial jet aircraft, only one person in four can benefit, so to speak, from such an announcement; in the largest, one in ten. Short, of course, of sending the whole can into a spin. (Do you remember that bonehead next to me, the one with the elbows? He lifted up my armrest, bent over to have a look, and slobbered his Chateau Chirac 1943 all over me. If he hadn’t been bigger, tougher, and more territorial than me, I would have hit him with my bag of dry-roasted peanuts.)

To keep everyone fully awake, entertained, and Served, Our Captain repeats each such announcement in seven languages. This way she/he can show off her/his linguistic ability, and find something to do while passing the time in the cockpit.

But one language is always missing: the second one of the country in question, such as Catalan in Spain, French in Canada, English in Australia. For these announcements, they use a special member of the crew—on flights to Australia, for example, someone who went to Oxford.

If this person belongs to the local independence movement, she/he will leap to the microphone and

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repeat the announcement as quickly and aggressively as possible, sneaking in somewhere the local battle cry. In Australia, to continue with our example, it is “Rule Britannia!” Less nationalistic ones survey the passengers very carefully, and when the optimal number has dozed off again, they amble up to the microphone and go over the whole thing again, as loudly as humanly possible.

Why is it, I always ask myself at these points—probably because I am in a dazed stupor—that the second language of a country always takes so many more words than the first? Oxford English en route to Australia is the worst. “Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. We do hope that you are enjoying your crossing. Your Captain has taken the greatest pleasure in informing you that the continued descent of this vehicle will cause the latex to hit the macadam in barely the twinkling of an eye. Would you be so kind, therefore, as to reconnect the two sides of your safety device. (Psst: Rule Britannia!)” Funny, all I thought I heard Our Captain say was, “Hang on mates, we’re headin’ down.”

At this point, I must make a little announcement of my own, since all of this is about Reader Service. If you think that we have all these tiny little chapters in order to stretch out this pamphlet so that it looks like a real book, you are sadly mistaken. We have them to enable you to read each chapter between the announcements. But please, read quickly.

This Is Your Captain Screaming

These could be louder, please

from Southwest:

“Weather at our destination is 50 degrees with some broken clouds, but we’ll try to have them fixed before we arrive. Thank you, and remember, nobody loves you, or your money, more than Southwest Airlines.”

(Appears widely on the Internet; original source unknown.)

from Southwest:

“We’re sorry for the delay. The machine that normally rips the handles off your luggage is broken, so we’re having to do it by hand. We should be finished and on our way shortly.”

(Appears widely on the Internet; original source unknown.)

After a particularly hard landing:

“Ladies and Gentlemen, please remain in your seats until Captain Crash and the Crew have brought the aircraft to a screeching halt up against the gate. And, once the tire smoke has cleared and the warning bells are silenced, we’ll open the door and you can pick your way through the wreckage to their terminal.”

(Appears widely on the Internet; original source unknown.)

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This is Your Dog biting

“In the next century, the crew in an aeroplane will be one pilot and one dog. The pilot is in the plane to feed and take care of the dog. The dog is in the deck to bite the pilot instantly if he tries to touch anything.”

(Appears widely on the Internet; attributed to University of Miami professor Earl Wiener telling the Airline Pilots Association about 21st century aircraft.)

8



“Welcome to New Zealand,” starts a favorite line of the pilots who fly Down Under. “Please set your watches back eight hours and your lives back 25 years.” This sounded rather good to me, even in Newzenglish, so I invited daughter Lisa along.

Poor kid getting there, though. Ten times going up and coming down. Up in Montreal, down in Ottawa; up in Ottawa, down in Calgary; up in Calgary, down in Los Angeles; up in Los Angeles, down in Honolulu; up in Honolulu, down in (whew!) Auckland. For the mere cost of another American college education, I could have sprung for a flight that skipped Calgary.

Ah, but the way back was so much more efficient. No matter how many ups and downs, we still arrived before we left. These are the little things I love about flying. All those hours in the airplane and no time lost at all. There we were, at John’s house in Auckland, having dinner on

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Sunday evening. “It is hard to believe,” I exclaimed, “that this very Sunday evening, at this very time, we shall be having dinner in Dick’s house in Los Angeles.”

But Lisa was having none of this. To this day, she cannot come to grips with the fact that she lost a day of her life on the way over—wiped out, gone forever. “But you got another one on the way back,” I continued to plead, to no avail. “What if it had been my birthday?” she wails.

I need to tell a little story about this. (You may have noticed that I need to tell a little story about everything. Please be assured that my little stories are all true. Only the details have been embellished, to persecute the guilty.)

I was to go to Australia first. *They* were paying, namely the Aussie businesspeople who invited me to give a seminar. They got me, and I got the points. Payola time! I was to join Lisa later in New Zealand, to frolic among the kiwis.

It was really quite simple. Get to San Francisco, change planes, and arrive refreshed in Sydney after another half a day, not to mention that day lost in the stratosphere. I had a few hours free between flights in San Francisco, so I arranged to meet Robert for dinner.

“Just let me check in,” I say to Robert innocently.

“Can I please see your passport?” asks this Quantum Airways guy dressed up in a koala suit.

“No problem, I never forget my passport,” I tell him. I eventually find it in the bottom of my bag.

The Dangers of Flying Down Under

“Where is the visa?” he asks.

“Visa?” I ask back.

“Visa,” he answers back.

“But I’m Canadian,” I answer his answer back. “The Australians are our friends. We belong to the same Commonwealth of Nations. We ask God to save our same, gracious Queen.”

“Canadians need visas to go to Australia,” says my compatriot.

“Bloody hell they do, mate,” I reply.

“Precisely,” he counters. “No problem. You can go to the Australian Consulate on Monday morning and get one.”

“But this is Friday evening,” I point out.

“Precisely,” he recounts. “They are closed until Monday morning.”

Robert and I stand there looking helpless. Robert teaches venturing at the Sitford Business School. “Do something,” I plead. So Robert looks helpful.

It works. We are handed a telephone. Another Quantum person is on the line, probably also in a koala suit. “Well,” he says, “you could go to New Zealand.”

“Go to New Zealand!” I say. “I need to be in Australia. I know this place is full of kangaroos, but New Zealand is no mere hop away.”

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For some reason, he does not appreciate my hilarious sense of humor. But he does understand. “Exactly,” he says. “The only way we can let you on that plane is if you are in transit to New Zealand. Otherwise, they fine us for allowing you on without a visa.”

So I go back to the counter and show them my ticket to New Zealand. Ha! No good, they say, you cannot be in transit for a week. So I buy another ticket to New Zealand.

My strategy on arrival is simple. I have to miss my connecting flight. What a treat! Then, not knowing what to do with me, they may just relent, and give me a visa right there. I have to be sure, however, not to utter a word about those Oxford English announcements.

In the Sydney Airport, I doodle, then amble over to Immigration. “Excuse me, sir. Will you have some time in about an hour or so? I arrived Pampered Class, which means I have all the time in the world. I would like to discuss a little problem with you. No rush. Transit lounges are such fun places to be. Besides, life is so hectic Up Over that any time we Pampered People get to relax is ever so appreciated.”

Eventually I end up in this guy’s office, a Mr. Ratched. “I know your sister,” I say, hoping to establish a friendly relationship. “Doesn’t she work for Air Gaul?”

“Can I please see your passport?” he answers, adding much later, “It’s at the bottom of your bag,

The Dangers of Flying Down Under

muttonhead.” Then comes the question I have been dreading. “Where is your visa?”

“Well, sir, you see, that is the little problem,” I say.

“I think we shall have to send you straight away to New Zealand,” he shoots back, pronouncing the last two words as if they are located beyond Hell. Drats. And I have just missed my plane. The next one is not for hours. In Auckland, I shall have to wait until Monday morning to go to the Australian Consulate. After that, I can fly back in time to wrap up my session on Monday afternoon.

Then it hits me. He said, “I think.” True, that could have meant he thought. But I entertain a more encouraging explanation, which is, “I have a good mind to teach you a lesson, one that you shall never forget.” As if that had not already happened in San Francisco. I knew right then and there that the British Commonwealth of Nations was dead. “Then when you are fully terrorized,” this explanation continues, “I shall ever so gratuitously relent, so that you will *know*, not *think*, what a wonderful human being I truly am.”

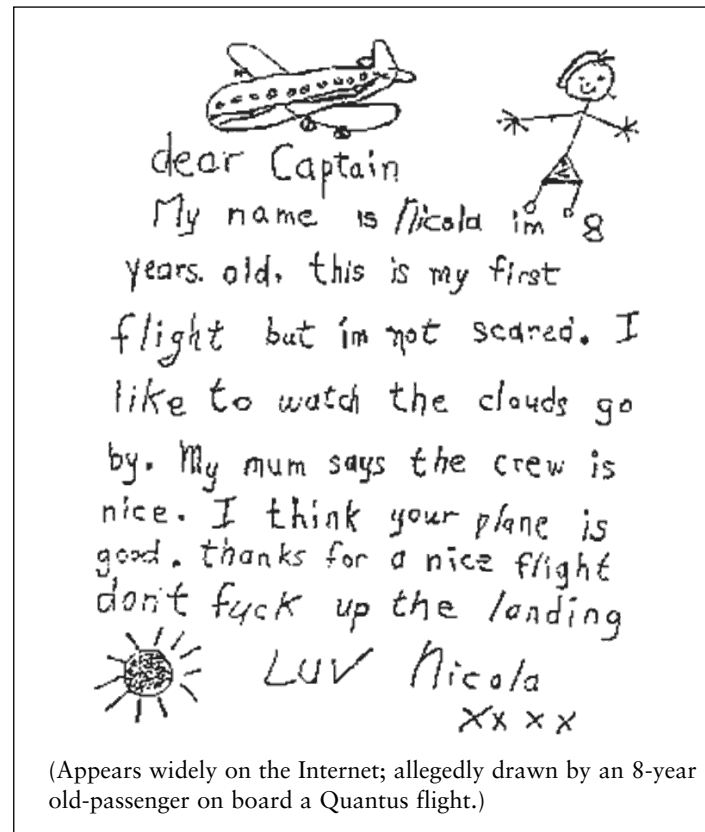
Do you think his “I think” meant what I thought? My suspicions are soon confirmed. He leaves the room, and another officer (no relation to the Ratched) sticks her head in. “Someone has been asking for you in Arrivals. I told her you won’t be long.” Just as I thought.

Eventually, he returns. So as not to spoil his fun, I keep perfectly calm, jumping up and down only twice.

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Then, on cue, he relents, grants my visa, allows me to shine his shoes in gratitude, and off I go.

Shortly after comes the realization that my bags have gone off to frolic among the kiwis of New Zealand. And so, in Sydney, Australia, I realize my lifelong ambition: I lecture to a roomful of proper executives in my dirty jeans.



(Appears widely on the Internet; allegedly drawn by an 8-year old-passenger on board a Quantus flight.)

9



Once upon a time, in an airline's head office, a finance person bumped into a marketing person at the caviar machine. Such encounters are rare and exceedingly dangerous. In this case, nothing has been the same since. Times were tight—their proper Lamborghinis were about to be replaced by BMWs—so there was a desperate search for new revenue. After looking around carefully to make sure no one from operations was listening—people who worry about landing gear and the like—they came up with an idea. Yes, an idea!

“All those—you know, what do you call them? passengers—up there: they are all captive, right? All that time and money, and no way to use either. We sure can. You remember on television last night they showed those—what do you call them?—advertisements. Well, we have television up there too, I seem to recall. And no mute buttons. But we do have “Seatbelt” signs.”

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Avarice Airways is delighted to inform you that the Helltown Hotel Chain and Pains Rent-a-Car are our partners in cream on the ground. We know you cannot wait to give them your money. If you do, out of the goodness of our hearts, we shall give you “Miles”!

Now let's put this proposition to a bit of scrutiny. Even if we accept for a moment that these airline people know something about flying, does that make them knowledgeable about sleeping and driving? True, not for a moment would I entertain the thought that My Airline would act in any interest but My Very Own. Without doubt, it has negotiated the best possible deals for me on the ground. Why, it knows, just by virtue of my sitting here in Pampered Class, how terribly strapped I am for cash and how I spend every penny of other people's money with the utmost care. Still, I have this nagging feeling that I could get a better deal if I asked the floor sweeper.

But acquiesce, I of course do. I have been conditioned to consume, programmed to participate. Up here, in the thin air, I can't even tell the difference between the announcements and the advertisements. I am so stupefied by all this yakking and hawking that when a contract consigning all my sleeping and driving to Helltown and Pains is placed before me, I sign obediently. But I must admit it was clever of them to slip it under the immigration

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card and say, “Sign these please, Mr. Jackass.” (As usual, I put all the information in the wrong boxes. I went up instead of down—or was it down instead of up?)

Then came “Duty Fee.” They call it “Duty Free,” but I believe the airlines have been altogether too free with their “r”s. Up here, being free of the needs to charge all those government duties has enabled them to slap on all these shareholder fees. And so, just as the pilots became entertainers, the flight attendants have become hucksters. And they enjoy it so!

Ah, here they come now, reminiscent of the peddlers of old, these merchants of new, pushing their carts down the aisles, ready to trade their booze and baseball cards for camels and goats. If you've got it, they'll take it. “For you, we have this lovely gold watch. Just the thing to double-check the lateness of the plane. A Wedgewood bowl for your cat? And mustn't forget our gold-plated gumdrops.” Business has apparently become so good that some airlines are reportedly replacing Sardine Class with a full-fledged souk.

Yet, if the airlines can be faulted—something that I, personally, would be loath to do—it is not for being too commercial, but for not being commercial enough. These people are barely out of diapers compared with real merchandisers—the International Olympic Committee, for example, even if those guys have yet to rent out the space on their own ties. Hey, listen, if the athletes can be sponsored by sugared drinks, surely the airlines can do a deal with life insurance.

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Marketeers love FMCGs. Some of them know that it stands for Fast-Moving Consumer Goods. Well, I ask you: Fizzy drinks? Yo-yos? Throw-away pens? Come on, guys, which of these can keep up with an airplane? Get moving, marketeers.

For starters, you will have to persuade the airlines that their business is no more about moving people around than the Olympic Games are about jumping over bars. These things are about money, which means they are about sex. And that means the airlines have been missing a sure score.

Take a good look at those planes. What an image! Pregnant with potential. Except for two little problems: the wings. Those things are unbearable. The wings will have to go.

The problem is perfectly clear. The airlines have, for too long, been run by the operations crowd, who are obsessed with landing gear and the like, even with getting people from one place to another. Such a silly idea. Like believing that clothing has to do with warmth, beer with inebriation, diamonds with drilling. Treating the passengers inside these tubes as seminal is like pretending that sex has to do with procreation. That is passé! These people are markets, that's all—exploitable sources of Shareholder Value. Imagine the potency of putting these planes into the hands of the marketing people. Let them get rid of those wings, and then watch the airline image take off.

With that, the real selling can begin. Not tickets; people have to buy those. Real selling. How about slot

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machines around the toilets, where everyone waits. Between announcements, the pilots can act as auctioneers—no further training necessary. They can auction off their insignia, autographed flight plans, full-scale models of the landing gear. How about guided tours of the wings? One section of the cabin might be designated “The Cabaret,” where the flight attendants can get to sing and dance. Why not vacuum-packed airline food for take-out (actually, why bother with the vacuum packing)? Imagine pedicures in Sardine Class, to gain some space. And personalized little white bags, embossed with the crest of the Marketing Team. As we have learned from those Olympics people, the possibilities are endless—like the skies.

For example . . .

Easyjet is running an advertisement showing a pair of attractive (female) breasts encased in a bikini top. The caption reads: “Discover weapons of mass distraction . . . lowest fares to the sun.” Ironically, Bikini, the island in the Pacific, was used as a test site for WMDs (nuclear bombs) in the forties and fifties.

(from Solomon.)

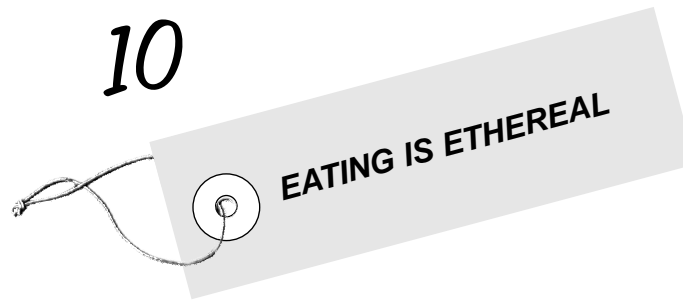
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And, for once, an exception

I once took a flight on which I was seated next to an insurance salesman, who annoyingly kept trying to sell me insurance. First one, then another engine caught fire, which threw the salesman into a total panic. He was sitting there crossing himself and praying to beat the band. He was distinctly unamused when I suggested that now was the time to sell me the insurance.

(From Ian MacMillan—personal correspondence; incidentally, the fires were put out by shutting down the two engines.)

10



So far, so good. But that is only because we have not come to the meals. Tuck in your bibs. Here they come!

We are on a plane (of course). I cannot remember where—and certainly not why. All I know is that I am sitting near the back, squashed alongside a window. They bring lunch. Cute little boxes. I get a brown one—for carnivores. The guy next to me, the one with the elbows, gets a green one—for vegetarians. (Hmmm, maybe I'll go for the armrest after all.) He finds vegetarian ham in his sandwich, which looks curiously like my carnivorous ham. So he calls over the flight attendant. "Can't be," she says. "The box is green. It must be vegetarian." He is able to make his point only because, lucky for him, the ham has not yet turned as green as the box.

Now, true, we don't always get little boxes. One flights of several days, we get little trays. People who have never flown before love those little trays. They are so adorable.

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The tiny cutlery, play knives and forks (well, forks anyway), and everything tucked into everything else, plus a spot of appetizer and a dab of dessert. Almost like real eating. And, in the middle of it all, the *pièce de résistance*—the main course, all wrapped up. Can't wait to dig under that foil.

By the side is a little sealed cup of water. In this thin air, it has become a one-sided balloon. Hey, Bonehead, open it carefully. Carefully! No! No! . . . (All over my coloring book.)

At home, I use my elbows when I eat. We're not big on straitjackets in our house. But up here, eating is ethereal. This must be how sardines eat.

I pick up the first course, a lovely little salad, two or three scraps of—yes, green—lettuce. I take off the plastic wrapping. Then I find the dressing. Now I have to put back down the salad to put on the dressing. Oh-oh. It fit there before. Can this be some kind of airline puzzle? I know, I'll put the water cup inside the coffee cup to make room for the salad. Whew! Pretty good, don't you think? Even without elbows.

I open the dressing. Whoops! "Sorry." (Serves him right for drenching my coloring book.) Now I know why they call it "dressing."

Better take out the napkin. I think I see it over there, hiding under the pepper. Whoops! Oh well, better leave it alone. I might spill something on my foot.

The fork works—sort of. Now to that *pièce de résistance*.

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Can't wait. I pick it up. Ouch!! What to do? Quick. I'll grab Bonehead's pillow; he'll never notice.

OK. Off goes that foil. Oh well, it isn't green.

What's he got? Sideways glance. Not to establish gender. Nothing lovely in sight. Only his fish. Hmmm. Not exactly white either. I wonder. No—I'd better stick with what I'm stuck with. But I will keep that fish in mind next time I fly from Vienna to Istanbul.

Let's see. I just have to set it down. Oh-oh. It fit there before . . .

Anyway, you get the idea. Eating in an airplane has to be treated like playing musical chairs. Except without the music—or the chairs. Plates instead. You always have to keep one in the air. I have become a master at sleeping while holding up an empty dessert dish.

Do you think the airlines have designated jobs to make the food taste bad? (I'm told they're called "Accountants.") This has to take effort, no? Food doesn't taste this bad all by itself. I wonder if they mix up the people who buy the fish with those who age the meat. Listen, I have an idea: Make them serve airline food in their own executive dining rooms. A fate worse than flying.

Now that problem with the vegetarian box could never have happened in Pampered Class. If you showed them a piece of lettuce as green as the fields of Ireland and claimed it was ham, they would whisk it away in a moment, apologizing all the way from Dublin to Dubai. So if you are serious about eating, let me take you

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through that magic curtain into Pampered Class. Not a moment too soon, you may be thinking—foolishly.

Some years back, the airlines wrestled with a terrifying problem: How to make Pampered Class as excessive as its price. A roomful of very significant executives gathered around a table and pondered this for months. They told each other very important things like, “We must distinguish our brand” and “It is imperative that we exploit our core competence.” Nobody knew what was going on.

Then, one memorable day, one of them leapt out of his chair and bellowed, “I think I’ve got it. Yes! Yes! We’ll ply them with champagne and foie gras.” His colleagues were beside themselves (where, as a matter of fact, they had been all along). After several carefully calculated moments of stunned silence, they all broke out in rapture. “Awesome!” they said, and “Brilliant!” This guy is so creative, they all thought, so generous, that they could hardly believe he had gone to Be School (which should really be called Get School).

All the other airlines, in comparable fits of creativity, followed suit. And so every goose in the Perigord and every grape in Gaul headed for cover as the race was on for fatter, bubblier, richer.

I take you now to a flight that I remember all too well, since I used to take it all too often: Air Kanuk 1867, from Montreal to Paris, Pampered Class, with the loopyest of loopers. It is getting on to 9:00 pm, meaning 3:00 am in Paris—we are almost two hours out of Montreal—and I have in front of me a starched tablecloth about a quarter

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of an inch thick. I am starved but must resist attacking the tablecloth because I have no cutlery.

The drinks have come, I do admit. There must have been an early chief of Air Kanuk who warned in his will that if ever a morsel of food was served before the drinks, he would put a hex on all the planes. Air Kanuk could be flying Muslims to Mecca at midnight and they would still serve the drinks before the food.

Finally, it comes—the cutlery, I mean—on a trolley with specially inflated tires. Each of the six items placed before me weighs some significant fraction of a pound, designed, no doubt, as ballast for the tablecloth should a window blow out.

The food is taking so long, it is as though they are out catching the fish. But I know better. So I wait patiently, much as did the member of the herd I am also about to be offered. Only four more hours to Paris. Air Kanuk’s The Ritual is unfolding on schedule.

To tease rather than ease our hunger, they put down these little beige things in front of me. The French call them “mises-en-bouche,” which can be roughly translated as “stick them in your mouth” although “on your mouth” would apply better. I use the handy toothpicks, but no matter: they whisk away my kilos of cutlery, and replace them all, as they will do several more times before The Ritual ends.

(If you have come to believe at this point that I am picking on Air Kanuk, then I wish to inform you that

you are perfectly correct. And I do this for a perfectly good reason. Not because Air Kanuk is a bad airline—in fact, it's not a bad airline as airlines go—but because, from where I live, I have to fly Air Kanuk a lot. So I spend my time hating Air Kanuk. Like everyone else, because I hate flying, I hate the airline I know best.)

The glossy four-color menu was presented to me some time earlier, like a diploma at a graduation ceremony. But still it offers the usual choice. Only the adjectival phrases change. But there are so many of them that nobody notices the two nouns that really matter. Tell me: Do you reheat steak and fish in your house?

I posed this very question in a letter I wrote to the Chief of Air Kanuk. For some reason, he never replied. Maybe the answer would have embarrassed him.

Why always steak and fish (although never, absolutely never, sardines)? Why not a simple lasagna? Lasagna is so good reheated. (Curries, too. Mmmm. I should have taken Air Hindi, even if they don't go to Paris.) Can't we once get something that tastes better than it sounds?

Anyway, it's back to the "Grilled Fillet of Beef with Bordelaise Sauce accompanied by Green Beans rolled with Bacon, Sautéed Mushrooms and Hashed Brown Potatoes," or else the "Fillet of Salmon in a Cream Sauce with Fennel served with Braised Endive, Saffron Rice and Tomato Cup with Spinach." Like I said, steak and fish. My decision hinges on why the beef is with the sauce while the fish is in it. But they can't explain, so I flip a spoon to decide, bruising my leg in the process.

Somehow I make it through whatever it is I had—hard to tell. The cheese follows, some time later, on its own cart. Each dainty little morsel of curdled milk is wrapped in its own little doily: Bombel from France and Velveeta from America, or at least their near equivalents, plus something blue (hopefully, intentionally so). I am supposed to make my choice like some kind of Count in a three-star Parisian restaurant. "That stuff over there," I point, with an elegant finger. I gobble it down, the cheese at least, then wait the socially correct interval for dessert. Eventually it appears, the carts rattling down the aisle as if in the Grand March from Aida. My choice is carefully scrutinized. "I'll take the banana," I say. No need to point. This I gobble up too. After subsequently fighting off six or eight offers of coffee, I prepare for sleep. We are still over the Atlantic. Barely.

That sleep is not long in coming. Nor in going. My Captain is soon back on the LOUDspeaker. "This is Your Captain screaming," he says, sounding like an announcer at a hockey game, although we passengers act like mourners at a wake. "It is so exciting! We are a mere hour and a half from Paris. Wakee! Wakee!" That may be true, but we are also a mere four and a half hours from Montreal, where it is now midnight. And my stomach has not yet even come to the Velveeta.

Once upon a time, a psychologist must have worked for an airline. "You have to give them the impression that they have passed the night," he surely said, "so that they will be ready for morning on the other side."

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“But that night is only two hours long,” they protested. He had a ready answer: “Look what we do with rats.” So the airlines have been putting us through this hoop ever since.

OK, let’s be fair. We do need time to get ready. Still, at home, that takes me twenty minutes—with a shower. What can I possibly do here that would take 90?

Then, suddenly, as I see that Grand March begin again, I remember: Breakfast! Of course: I must have breakfast, in order to wash down—really drive down—the layers upon layers of dinner. I dare not say no; I am, after all, a passenger in an airplane.

So, obedient pampered sardine that I am, I watch them begin again. Tablecloth. Kilos of cutlery. Reheated eggs, bacon, sausage, ham, mushrooms, and tomato. Something that looks like bread. I swallow it all—my way of encouraging AK1867 mercifully to end. So sad to leave. Loaded down with a trunk full of gold-plated gumdrops, not to mention breakfast over dinner, each course waiting patiently for its turn at my digestive tract, I stagger out of the can, my wallet lighter, my body heavier. This is the moment when I wonder why I didn’t take along that cute little white bag.

The years pass; the suspense builds. What has become of my letter to the Chief? Surely someone has read it. I shall try again. And guess what? There it is, right on the menu. True, not exactly your everyday noodles: “Egg Pasta Duo filled with spinach, mushrooms, ricotta, cheddar, and

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Parmesan cheese garnished with carrot and zucchini Bâtonnets.”

Now I know what you’re thinking: He can’t fool us, this Mr. Jackass. Had he left well enough alone with the Braised Endive, Tomato Cup, and Duo, we might have believed him. But sticking that circumflex over the “â” on “Bâtonnets” took it right over the top.

In that case, I suggest you spend a month or two in Air Kanuk’s archives, where you will discover the Bâtonnets duly circumflexed in both languages. (The dish was 18 words in English, 25 words in French. See what I mean?)

I ponder my choice. Was I put on this earth to eat Pasta Duos with Bâtonnets at 30,000 feet? Finally I take the noodles. How could I do otherwise? They might have reported me to the Chief, who then might have invited me to his house for a reheated dinner. “Everyone wants the pasta,” our flight attendant moans, stupefied by the fact that people on an airplane would all do the same thing. “We had to refuse three people.”

Sadly, I was not one of them. For there then came the gooiest, most overcooked pasta we have ever eaten, me and my nice neighbor with whom I commiserated (the one with his own armrest). Why can’t they just stick to the things they know how to ruin?

They don’t ruin the wine on airplanes. That’s for sure. No one is employed to make the wines taste bad. There are, however, all kinds of people employed to

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make them sound good. They all have advanced degrees in Creative Writing; some have even tasted the stuff.

Here, Air Kanuk was upstaged by its long arch-rival, Kanukian Airlines International, the one it has long since swallowed. KAI—the words were put in this order because they didn't want to be known as the KIA—was simply brilliant on the wines. The brochures, I mean; not the grapes.

The one I have before me is 17 (seventeen!) pages long and has a cover as thick as Air Kanuk's tablecloths. It is called Cellar Secrets des Celliers (English in one word before, French in two words after—twice as many—while in between they share the word Secrets, which doubtless raised an eyebrow or two in the Quebec separatist movement). Gracing the full-page presentation of each wine is a color picture of the vineyard's owner. Glass in hand, he is dressed as if he spends his time stomping elegantly on the grapes.

Page one promises us that KAI's "wine consultants . . . relentlessly search for quality and grape varietal [I think it means variety] character . . . reflected in the innovative offerings on your flight today." Here is what the guzzlers of the booze must know about the Chablis:

The village and vineyards of Chablis are surrounded by Kimmereidgian clay deposited there by the great flood. It is this "terroir" that gives Chablis its remarkable mineral character. The Goulley family, headed by the young energetic Philippe, has been making wine in

Eating Is Ethereal

Chablis for generations and understands clearly the risks of growing vines in Chablis. These vines are the most vulnerable in France. Philippe is a dynamic force in Chablis where he is spearheading a movement to farm organically. His Chablis is classic. . . . [Its] unmistakable crisp fruit aromas and mineral characters abound in the aftertaste.

Philippe provides deeper insight: "My business is very traditional which means keeping still creates no progress. I strive for innovation that will work alongside tradition. We can't change the soil's nature but we can watch what we put into the soils." That's a good idea.

Two pages on, a guy from Australia says: "Understanding a customer's needs forms the basis of my philosophy." Smart. Why isn't this guy running an airline? His wine has "a hint of vanilla." Other wines in the brochure have "buttery flavors," "aromas of fresh plum jam," and "terrific fruit on the nose." If they could only find a wine with "the punch of garlic," they wouldn't need to serve food at all.

Still, try as they do, these Kanukians have remained in the little league. "The wine specialists who, with Air [Gaul], selected the wines we are serving you today are from Courtiers-Jurés Piquers de Vins de France. They were appointed official wine tasters to King Charles IV Le Bel of France by decree on March 12, 1322." Wow! These guys are really old! And this brochure is really suave—four pages is all they need.

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Still, we get the last laugh, we Kanuks. The French might get the old wines, but we get the new desserts. On a flight back home, Air Kanuk offered me this little package labeled “Vanilla Ice Cream Bar with Chocolate Coating.” Now you’re talking! Especially appreciated by those of us who suffer from a chocolate deficiency. Best of all is trying to figure out what to do with the half you don’t eat. Can there be hope for flying after all?

Some down-to-earth food

In 1999 Floyd Dean, trapped aboard a Northwest flight waiting to leave Las Vegas for Detroit, got so exasperated by the lack of decent food that he bolted. He got off the plane, hailed a cab and went into town, where he had a bite to eat. About 90 minutes later he returned to the plane, which still hadn’t taken off. It couldn’t very well have: Dean was its pilot. The 150 passengers had to sit and wait. (Dean was later fired!)

(Appears in *Forbes magazine*, from “America’s worst airline?”, 11 June 2001, page 115.)

11



DEALING WITH A “LITTLE PROBLEM”

Once before, I must admit, I got a really good night’s sleep in an airplane. Air Kanuk, no less, to London, no less, this time for all the wrong reasons.

I had to get from a Saturday evening in Quebec City to Monday morning in London for a day of teaching. My only hope was to take a very early flight to Toronto, where I could catch a day flight to London. I take you now to the airport in Quebec City at 6:00 am on a nippy day in December.

What a line-up! Both of us. Why, I wonder, do New Yorkers herd into La Gotcha Airport on a Friday evening when they could go out of Quebec City on a Sunday morning? I board—no waiting, no passports, no trunks, no armrests. The plane goes a few feet, then stops for a nice little shower. It doesn’t like ice on its wings. No problem. Better it should wait than me. Then it goes a little further and comes back for another little shower. Oh-oh. Less

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nice. Now the plane and I are both waiting. Any thought that this might be some kind of airplane fetish is dashed by that famous click of the loudspeaker. It is Our Captain screaming. We have one of those “little problems.”

Let me tell you: There is no such thing as a “little problem” on an airplane. There is a problem or there is not a problem.

* * *

Here (Your Author scribbling, yet again) I must announce a little interruption of my own. (OK, an interruption.) I must take you back on a flight to University Park, Pennsylvania, some years earlier, in a really little airplane—eight simple souls lost in the clouds.

This is going to be fun, I think to myself. For once, a real airplane. [Hey! Wait a minute. Did you notice? We interrupt this interruption to bring you a really important revelation. I don't hate flying at all! Turns out I love flying, even when there is no one lovely in sight. It's those airlines I hate, those big bureaucracies of the sky.]

Back in the little airplane, we are having a nice flight so far. We sit two across, one on each side of the aisle. The other passengers must be anthropologists doing research on the distances between people in airplanes. Except for the guy next to me—he's a Brit on his way to visit his pen pal in Pennsylvania. No kidding. Never stepped foot in a plane before today, back in London. “You're going to love this little plane,” I tell him.

Dealing with a “Little Problem”

OK, so I got it wrong. I hear the landing gear go down. Ever so reassuring. Then I hear the landing gear go down again. Less reassuring. Here comes that famous click. “We have a ‘little problem’ with the landing gear,” says our pilot. Not to worry. All we have to do is fly around for an hour or so in the turbulence so that the plane can empty its fuel tanks.

In the process, most of the passengers do likewise. Finally, some justification for all those cute little white bags. A little too little for the guy diagonally opposite me, however, who seems to be on some sort of nonstop excursion. A wretched hour indeed.

Not to be rude, certainly not to avoid the guy diagonally across, I change seats. I head for one at the back. It's empty there, and I once heard about planes preferring to mess up their fronts first. Besides, there's a door back there, just for me. All my life I have wanted to be the first one out of an airplane. Why not today?

There I make an important discovery, to the great chagrin of my little white bag. My seat goes all the way back, and by stretching my stomach way out, I manage to keep my fuel tanks full. But why not? Their contents don't pose a fire hazard.

Our pilot tells us that we shall be heading for Harrisburg, where there is “more equipment.” Oh-oh. It's like mountain climbing, I tell myself: The worst that can happen is that I'll die.

They do a flyover so that someone on the ground

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can check the wheels. Apparently they look quite fine, sitting there underneath the plane, even though the control panel inside the can disagrees. So the decision is made to try to land normally—no foam.

[Did I make it? Can you stand the suspense? I'm taking bets. Even money. Write to jackass@delphi.bray.]

Here goes: Heads buried in hands—as instructed, silly—we touch down. Quite literally. It has to be one of the most delicate landings in the several hundred million years since flying began, although after that it becomes rather abrupt: we stop in eight millimeters. In the process, every bell and whistle in the plane shrieks in protest. “You should not have done that,” cries one, and “Crazy bunch of cowboys in the cockpit,” yells another. Why one gentle little gong would not have sufficed, I cannot imagine.

We disembark to discover the “equipment” in question: precisely one ambulance for each of us in the plane—an ambulance of my very own!—plus hordes of relieved firefighters. So much for that “little problem.”

* * *

Our little problem in Quebec City does not get fixed. Our flight has been canceled. That is the bad news (or is it the good news?). The good news (bad news?) is that I can fight my way back through the storm to the hotel and finish my good night's sleep. I have been put on an afternoon flight to Montreal and from there

Dealing with a “Little Problem”

onto an overnight flight to London. The other good news is that there is no room in Pampered Class. The other bad news is that my hour of rarefied sleep is doomed, and so, therefore, is my next day of teaching.

In Montreal, whine and grovel though I may, not a single pampered seat opens up. I am given a piece of paper that will reimburse me for being reduced to Full-Fleece Economy. (Weeks later, the check arrived, for—I kid you not—\$75. The case is about to go before the International Tribunal for Airline Atrocities in Kabul.)

Anyway, I head for Sardine Class. And guess what? It's empty. Everyone has escaped to Pampered Class—for those *Bâtonnets* with their circumflexes, no doubt. That is probably why the plane flies all the way to London with a slight downward tilt.

I walk straight to a row of three seats. I bless the fact that only two armrests need be raised. I grab a bunch of those towels they call blankets and several of those postcard pillows and down I go, arriving in the clouds before the plane.

We are blessed with a pilot who must have laryngitis. He fails to point out Iceland, several thousand miles up north, so I sleep wonderfully well, waking naturally less than an hour before landing. Still time for a shower. (What, no wake-up call?) And then, guess what? They bring me breakfast! Those kind, considerate people of Air Kanuk have thought of everything, including breakfast for those of us who may have missed dinner.

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At Haltrow Airport, aware that I am on a roll, they clear away all the lines, so that for once all goes well. The only problem is the line-up to buy tickets at the Underground, which snakes back and forth like an intestine. (When you arrive at Haltrow over ground, it is best to go to London underground.)

But the gods continue to favor me, for there, right near the front of the line, is my old acquaintance Reinhold. So not only do I get my ticket quickly, but I have a chance to harangue poor Reinhold all the way to London.

Reinhold works for Lifthands. I tell him about this book I am writing, on why I hate flying. Yes, I know, Reinhold tells me politely every time we meet, “You tell me about it every time we meet.” And then he adds, even more politely, “I am looking forward to reading it.” Ye gods! Looking forward? If Reinhold is looking forward, should I be looking backward? I mean, are they going to let airline people read this book?

Anyhow, that is how I arrived at my destination, fully relaxed, only a half-hour late, there to spend a wonderful day teaching. Ever since, I make sure to book Sardine Class, Seats 93X, 93Y, and 93Z.

Dealing with a “Little Problem”

The pilot’s little problem

After a particularly hard landing, the pilot had to stand in the doorway while the passengers exited, trying to look them in the eye. Finally everyone had gotten off except for this little old lady walking with a cane. She said, “Sonny, mind if I ask you a question?” “Why no Ma’am,” said the pilot, “what is it?” The little old lady said, “Did we land or were we shot down?”

(Appears widely on the Internet; original source unknown.)

Landing homilies

- Takeoffs are optional. Landings are mandatory
- If we are what we eat, then some pilots should eat more chicken.
- I give that landing an A . . . on the Richter scale.
- There are old pilots and there are bold pilots, but there are no old bold pilots.
- You start with a bag full of luck and an empty bag of experience. The trick is to fill the bag of experience before you empty the bag of luck.

(Appears widely on the Internet; original source unknown.)

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“We’ll fix you”

Maintenance complaints submitted by pilots and replies from the maintenance crews

1. Problem: “Something loose in cockpit.”
Solution: “Something tightened in cockpit.”
2. Problem: “Mouse in cockpit.”
Solution: “Cat installed.”
3. Problem: “Evidence of leak on right main landing gear.”
Solution: “Evidence removed.”
4. Problem: “Test flight OK, except autoland very rough.”
Solution: “Autoland not installed on this aircraft.”
5. Problem: “Dead bugs on windshield.”
Solution: “Live bugs on back-order.”
6. Problem: “Friction locks cause throttle levers to stick.”
Solution: “That’s what they’re there for.”
7. Problem: “Number three engine missing.”
Solution: “Engine found on right wing after brief search.”

Dealing with a “Little Problem”

8. Problem: “Target radar hums.”
Solution: “Reprogrammed target radar with lyrics.”
9. Problem: “Noise coming from under instrument panel. Sounds like a midget pounding on something with a hammer.”
Solution: “Took hammer away from midget.”
10. Problem: “Aircraft handles funny.”
Solution: “Aircraft warned to straighten up, fly right, and be serious.”
(Appears widely on the Internet; original source unknown.)



Because the subject has already come up, let us return to the airports. That is the trouble with flying: We always have to return to airports. Think of how much fun flying would be if we didn't have to return to the airports. It is not only flights from Singapore to Helsinki that go from SIN to HEL.

The problem might be their individuality. Airports are so unique, so preciously different from everything around them, that you can never tell whether you are in Nagano, Napoli, or Nashville. It is as if some giant helicopter appeared one day from the Great Airport Assembly Factory in the Sky and simply dropped each given airport in its place.

It is really quite amazing that you can cross the world in a few hours and arrive in a wholly different culture without ever having to leave the comfort of Your Very Own Culture. There may be rickshaws out

there, or penguins, but don't worry: Your world is safe in here.

Your Very Own Culture is, of course, that of the Global Manager. The Global Managers in question are, of course, those who studied economics or engineering in some country they can no longer remember and then took an MBA in America, which, unfortunately, they remember all too well. This has enabled them to fly between companies much as they fly between countries. The Global Products in question are, of course, generic: they must look the same, taste the same, and earn the same, whether in Peoria or Palermo. The Globe in question is actually a ribbon about a thousand miles wide that begins from Seattle to San Diego and runs eastward to the stretch from Buda to Pest before it picks up again from Beijing to Shanghai and ends in Osaka to Tokyo. A long, thin global village.

The home of these Global Managers is, of course, the international airport. Don't get confused. Transportation is the least of it. These Global Managers meet here, they eat here, and they sleep here. You may recall that they wait here too. And above all else, they shop here. Skiphole Airport, near Amsterdam, has designated the flag as well as the motto for this club. "See. Buy. Fly." their shopping bags scream out in astounding yellow, for people who have never made it past "See Jane run."

Global Managers, despite what immigration inspectors in Australia have been led to believe, are busy people with

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rarely a moment to spare, least of all to buy the products they foist on everyone else. Except in airports, where there is all this waiting to be done.

That is when fond memories arise of the family they never see—the little lady, for example, whose skin is longing for the nectars of Provence, her fingers for the minerals of Africa, her lungs for the leaves of Virginia. Lest the minds of these Global Managers wander from the wonders of such consumption, the airports are considerate enough to provide a few simple reminders—pasted on the carts, penned into the carpets, plastered all over the windows (in Prague, no kidding). Each and every one of these ads evokes an image of the cataclysmic coupling that will inevitably follow such offerings. Tell her you love her forever with a diamond bought as you raced from one plane to another, and you may never recover from the tryst.

And what bargains! African necklaces for thousands. French perfumes for hundreds. English cigarettes for tens. Canadian toothpicks for ones. Those of you not blessed with the Global Life may be wondering at this point, “But what on earth of real use can be bought in an airport?” Staples, that’s what. (No, not those things you attach papers with.) So it’s off before takeoff to stock up on the essentials of life: groceries (Chernobylois Caviar, Smoked Antarctic Penguin, Beersheba Bacon); clothing (gaiters, gauntlets, galoshes); discreet personal items (rattlesnake condoms, Chateau Chirac wines, balsamic vinegar toothpaste).

Why We Love to Hate Airports Even More

The Global Manager’s home away from home is, of course, The Pampered Lounge. These are such friendly places to be. Just think of all those times someone said to you: “Sure, take the seat; my coat doesn’t really need it.” Best of all is the décor, so novel it puts the rest of the airport to shame.

At this point, you must be wondering: If the shopping is so good, the people so friendly, the place so individualized, what exactly does this Mr. Jackass love to hate about airports? My answer is simple: Haltrow.

If you want to know what overgrown means, don’t waste your time eating genetically modified fruits and vegetables in America. Spend a few hours at Haltrow. Taxiing to the arrival gate, for example. (You can’t *fly* all the way to Haltrow.) Or transferring to Terminal 4. What these people call terminals, other people call airports. I hear they are introducing scheduled flights between Terminals 3 and 4 at Haltrow.

If you think terminals are a problem at Haltrow, try parking. Once I got into a bus with a friend to go to her car. That bus made about fifteen stops before it finally got to the lot where her car was parked. One of those stops was for another bus—to an “overflow” parking lot. Yet we were the lucky ones: Someone told me he missed a fight because all those lots were full. He should have parked in Piccadilly Circus and walked.

Haltrow is not all waiting. It is British. It has Class. “Dear Premium Passenger,” this particularly pink envelope says.

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As one of our most valued customers, we invite you to use the Immigration Fast Track Lane. . . . Simply place your completed landing card inside this special envelope and present it to our staff as you enter the Arrivals Hall. You will then be directed to the proper channel.

A *proper* channel for the Pampered Class, to slip past everyone else squashed into two lines, one for ordinary Europeans, the other for ordinary foreigners.

I get it. This has to be Tony Blare's "third way" (I always wondered what that meant)—a Fast Track for the Business Class. Pay a private company more money, and the state gives you better service. What a privilege to live in such a democracy.

Haltrow is also the land of the bargain. A whole advertising campaign was mounted to tell us about it. "You don't get fleeced at Haltrow," the ads claimed. Well, not in so many words. The ads showed two pictures of some necessity of life—mink socks or whatever—one with the price at Haltrow, the other showing the same price at some place like Harolds of Serfsbridge.

Well, since Harolds is hardly my idea of a bargain basement, I checked out one of these deals—you know, did a little research. (I am not just winging this book, after all.) Instead of choosing just any old product, I selected one that is necessary for all the others. It is probably the biggest seller at Haltrow, surely the biggest maker of money. I refer, of course, to money.

Why We Love to Hate Airports Even More

"Pardon me, madam," I say to this woman with "Thomas Bake" written above her head in great big letters. "If *I* give *you* a hundred American dollars, how many British pounds will *you* give *me*?" The lights flash, the computer goes round and round, the bells whistle, the gongs chime. "Fifty-four pounds and thirty pence," she says.

"Good. Now if *I* give *you* fifty-four pounds and thirty pence, how many American dollars will *you* give *me* back?"

Same routine. "Eighty-seven dollars and thirty cents," she says. Hmm. Why am I wasting my time writing books for millions of enthralled readers when I could be selling money at Haltrow, the bargain airport.

Then I think: maybe \$100 is not fair. How about \$1,000? I'm a high roller, after all. More chimes, bells, and whistles. "909.39" she writes on a piece of paper. So Tom gets 4½ percent each way—not per year or per month, but per moment.

This can't be, I say to myself with increasing disbelief as the years roll on. Finally I see an advertisement in Haltrow that says "SAVE MONEY. CHANGE HERE." over the insignia of Thomas Bake and the Blimey Airports Authority. So I try again. "\$885," she says this time. Drat—I forgot about inflation.

* * *

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N'gara, in northwest Tanzania, is my idea of a proper airport. Even the apostrophe gives it class. (The code for N'gara is '.)

None of those ugly black tarmacs at N'gara. The landing strip is a beautiful rust red, a perfect match for the surrounding earth. Instead of being hidden away in some boring field, this airport is perched high up on a crest, with beautiful wide valleys all around. If, as the plane is landing, you amble up to the windshield to have a good look around, you see this wonderful view.

When I flew there, N'gara had regularly scheduled flights: the Red Cross plane went in every Monday and Thursday. You could even get one of the regular seats if they hadn't all been piled high with boxes. That way, you didn't have to sit sideways. There was no bus to the overflow parking lots at N'gara. Yet no one seemed to mind. The jeeps did have to park away from the runway, so as not to be bumped by the planes.

N'gara had about as many huts as Halloway has terminals. Each hut was high enough to stand a couple of people if it rained (in which case, the planes couldn't land anyway). But the immigration officer I saw preferred to sit, so he worked out of his car. The Tanzanian government had not yet found it necessary to have a special track for the Pampered Class. But come to think of it, there was no Pampered Class on the Red Cross plane. N'gara does have its little advantages.

Why We Love to Hate Airports Even More

Some may think it had its little problems too. There was no duty-free, no Thomas Bake, not even any advertisements. (Hey, Global Managers, N'gara is part of the Globe too.)

It is in the hope of avoiding the mistakes of N'gara that I have included the next chapter of this book.

Where grandmas come from

When I stopped the bus to pick up Chris for preschool, I noticed an older woman hugging him as he left the house. "Is that your grandmother?" I asked.

"Yes," Chris said. "She comes to visit us for Christmas."

"How nice," I said. "Where does she live?"

"At the airport," Chris replied. "Whenever we want her, we just go out there and get her."

(Appears widely on the Internet; original source unknown.)

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Why grandma's shouldn't

A couple I know were waiting for the wife's grandmother at the Naughty Airport. The elderly lady was coming to America for the first time, from Belgium. When she finally came out, it was clear to them that she had been crying. Her granddaughter had asked her to bring some special Belgian baby powder, which she had repacked into some nice little plastic bags. She was stopped at customs—Belgian great-grandmothers are particularly dangerous people—and a search produced these bags. The guy then put her through a third degree. When she couldn't name her Grade 3 gymnasium teacher, things got worse. Why the guy did not just try the stuff—you know where—we can only guess. Finally he let her go. Now ask yourself: Which one was the dope?

Ready for a break?

WE INTERRUPT THIS DIATRIBE AGAIN

TO BRING YOU

ANNE

A SHORT STORY ABOUT WHY I LOVE LANDING

No shoes in sight. (Row 3 this time.) Only this beautiful head, above these elegant clothes. Same as at check-in—alone there, standing well back. Well black too, from toe to head. Seemed cold then and here.

No need for sideways glances. She sits two seats over, from whence cometh the Customer Service. So he has to turneth and sayeth no every few seconds: no food, no booze, no coffee, no tea, no tea, no coffee. No interruptions? Not no nuts. Nothing else to share but the discouragement. What's hers?

Water for him. The works for her, plus two bottles of champagne. One way to resist temptation.

Come to think of it, why is she flying business class

from Dublin to London? On a Saturday evening? He, after all, has a (lame) excuse. The usual.

Dinner. Time for conversation. "Been cold a long time?" he could have asked. But no, he's impolite. Had enough of that routine, anyway. Besides, she's too elegant, too black. Even if he is wearing his new brown shoes.

So, while the gorgeous head gorges, beside those pillars of champagne, the bald head dozes, beneath this cloud of discouragement. Long preflight phone call. Why must it be so complicated?

He awakens. Food gone, champagne too. Both bottles.

She reads a report. Traces forth and back across the page, a solitary finger, line by line. What in the world can possibly be so traceable? Not this. No story here.

Beneath his water sits her book. On no person's seat. Maybe she'll forget it. Then he can say, "Umm, excuse me. . . ." And she can reply, "Why, that is ever so kind of you." Meanwhile he can't make out the title. Must be English. Can't be Gaelic, not with hair that black. She picks up the airplane magazine. Puts it right back down. Not from Hamilton apparently.

Then it happens. As his water departs, out of the black reaches an elegant hand—a hand that once seemed so cold—and gently closes their tray. Just like that.

They land. She takes the book. Can't interrupt her now. Puts a chic black coat over the elegant black clothes. Neatly hands him the bundle of coat he had dumped above.

They wait. Can interrupt her now: "Funny how people are so anxious to get out of airplanes, yet they are in no rush to leave trains." Not funny at all, let alone clever. She smiles nonetheless, a warm white smile.

Out they go, she first. He grabs a spare cart, dumps in it his heavy briefcase. Down they go, along the corridors of Halthrow. A moving sidewalk appears on the left. She goes right. Walks fast, smart. Smart enough, but not fast enough. He comes out ahead. She walks faster, smarter. Passes him. Another moving sidewalk. She goes right again. (Will she never learn?) He slips out ahead, into a long narrow corridor. No chance to pass now. Ha!

Click, click, click, go those smart black shoes, not so well back. Haunting sound. Click, click,

click. No one else within miles. Just that memorable click, click, click.

A carousel appears. They wait respectively. "Is this where the baggage comes from Dublin?" he asks. "Dublin? How should I know? I've just come from Rio," she could have answered, freeing herself from all this. But no, "Yes," she says. "It usually comes in on this one." She moves closer to talk. Now they're flying, these two, all alone, still out of sight.

His bag comes out. He puts it on the cart and waits. Her bag comes out. She puts it by her feet and waits. They wait respectively, talking respectfully. "Is that your only bag?" she asks eventually. "Yes," he answers. "Me too," she says. He offers her bag a place on his cart. Thus they depart arrivals.

In the main hall, he asks where she is going. "West London," she answers. He tells her where he is going: "Is that West London?" She thinks so. A taxi will be shared by all.

But first she must make a call. A cellular phone appears, black, unlike her disposition. No one home. "I'm sorry to have kept you waiting," she says.

"Do the Irish always apologize for everything, like the English?" he asks.

"Yes," she answers, with a hint of brogue, "except that we mean it!" He does love the Irish. He means it!

Into the taxi they go, lady in black in the black cab, followed by man in brown. New shoes. Lots to share (without the discouragement). She loves Dublin. Has spent her life there. (Does seem to escape to London for what's left of the odd weekend, however.) He just spent two days in Dublin and loved it too. Fate? No, never strikes twice in the same book.

And that damnable question; must ask that damnable question. She runs a facial salon in Dublin's Fair City, to make the girls there that much more pretty. Other girls, apparently, even if she was out of diapers back then. Has six employees, plus five part-timers. Works long hours. He writes, he tells her, including a book about why he hates flying. (He tells everyone he is writing a book about why he hates flying.) He illustrates. She laughs. "So that's why you didn't take the food. You only drink water in airplanes." Ah so, more than gender has apparently been established by all concerned. Must be the new shoes. Out of sight.

She tries the phone again. Still no answer. Serious happenings now. Supposed to visit friends.

Left the address behind, at the shop. A new address, off Oxford Street. Can't be many of those.

Later, friends become "Peter." "I know Peter," she says. "He's sleeping it off."

As the miles tick, the situation worsens. Well, actually it improves—the journey if not the destination. More calls. Still no Peter. Leaves a message. What to do?

He gets an idea (!!). "Maybe we can find his address in the phone book." Perhaps cabby can call: "Excuse me, cabby. . . ."

"What's his name?" cabby asks.

"Peter!" he announces proudly.

"Ah, one of the apostles then," shoots back this man who has been selected for the journey (not the destination).

Now what? All good things must come to an end, that's what, though no one is rushing. She's in great glee, he's freshly invigorated (What, him discouraged?). Cabby is enjoying it all too (while the meter runs). What a team!

"Where off Oxford Street?" asks cabby. Not sure: "I think it starts with a B," says the lady in black,

who must have a name. The street has a name. "Berners?" the cabby flings back. "I think that's it!" replies the lady without a name, with equal discrimination. Can't be more than several hundred flats there. "It's near the corner," she said.

It must have been at this point that he asks if she drank both bottles of champagne. "No, I put one away," she replies. "OK, then you're forgiven," he says. But not for being delightful.

Come to think of it, why must all good things come to an end?

Cabby suggests Peter might be waiting at Terminal 2. "You came in at Terminal 1. This flight usually comes in at Terminal 2."

Which flight, cabby?

"Not Peter," says the lady without a name. "I know Peter. He's at home, sleeping it off."

Ever to the rescue, cabby suggests a sleeping bag, laid down off Oxford Street. Until Peter sleeps it off. But where to find a black one elegant enough to grace a body such as this?

They get to his hotel. Good thing must end now. Blacker hair waiting upstairs. Can the concierge

13

**RULES FOR DESIGNING
THE PERFECT AIRPORT**

[This is Your Author scribbling, once again. This chapter reproduces a document smuggled to me by a disgruntled airport employee, admonished for having made a passenger's life easier. I could get into trouble for publishing it—they have ways of losing luggage, you know. So please promise not to show it to any airport person. On the other hand, once you have read it, you will be in no danger of showing it to any such person. Please note that this chapter should not be read on an airplane. It is much too long. You would be interrupted constantly. It has been designed to be read in an airport. I am sorry it is so short.]

* * *

Let us be perfectly clear at the outset: Airports do not exist to get passengers to airplanes. That is a myth perpetuated by generations of advertising campaigns.

Airports exist for two reasons: (1) to maximize Shareholder Value along the path to the gate, which, alas, must eventually be reached by most passengers; and (2) to gratify the glee of the groundies. [A groundie is a groupie who works for the airport.]

For some reason, people about to be hurtled into space arrive at airports under conditions of great anxiety. They are worried about missing their planes, and even more worried about not missing their planes. The purpose of an airport is to convert these conditions of great anxiety into states of sheer terror, from which the owners can profit while the groundies get entertained. Most airports have made a heroic start in this direction. But a great deal remains to be done. Hence this document.

Rules for not getting near the place

1. It goes without saying—hence, we say—that the more terminals the better, and the greater the distance between terminals the better. Where distances are short, we recommend engaging an intestinal surgeon to lay out the roads between terminals.
2. Never reveal what goes on in the different terminals. It is nobody's business but your own. Should you be forced to post explanatory signs on the incoming highways, be sure that they can be read by the arriving passengers, so long as they walk slowly.
3. Run transfer buses between the terminals on a regular schedule—for example, on the odd-numbered hours. Post the routing in tiny little letters above the

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windshield, perpendicular to the boarding passengers. Forbid these buses to stop where numerous passengers are inclined to wait, because that will only increase the pushing and shoving.

4. Make terminal parking for passengers as convenient as possible. Charge it at \$20 per minute. “Long-term parking,” so named for the time it takes to get to the terminal building, should be provided at a fraction of this rate ($\frac{3}{4}$).

Rules for not rolling into the place

1. Luggage carts are particularly problematic, so a number of rules must be strictly adhered to. The most important is that every cart must have one wheel perpendicular to the other three.
2. These carts may be provided in two ways: (a) *free of charge*, still favored in much of Western Europe and most of Canada (socialists, all); and (b) *full of charge*, which is popular in more enterprising America. Only (b) carts should be placed in convenient locations—for example, where passengers arrive at the airport. Putting the free-of-charge carts inside the terminal building, at the far end, enhances the impact of cart jockeys. Never underestimate the terrorizing effect on passengers of having a half-kilometer snake of carts pushed through a crowded airport by someone who cannot see ahead.
3. Under no circumstances must these carts be designed to hold anything but small, rectangular suitcases.

Rules for Designing the Perfect Airport

People who travel with large, soft packs, skis, bicycles, and other awkward luggage must be punished by the sarcastic looks from their fellow passengers as their prized possessions crash onto the floor.

4. Finding the carts is one thing; actually using them is quite another. Security Control plays an important role here by forcing passengers to vacate their carts when they have barely begun their roll to the gate. The fact that people find these carts useful for their one-minute walk to Security Control is no indication whatsoever that they will find them useful for the many-minute walk to the gate. Let the passengers check everything—they can eat cake at duty-fee.
5. For changing floors, locate the elevators in obscure spots, around corners, carefully placed to allow the ingoing carts to block those coming out. Each elevator should hold precisely 1.8 carts.

Rules for not checking into the place

1. Numerous opportunities exist to aggravate those passengers who persist in getting to check-in. Best is to have one single line, at least for Economy Class, surrounded by empty lines for the Business Class, the First Class, and the Upper Class, each with several agents filing their fingernails.
2. Contrary to what you might expect, we do not favor long waiting periods in the check-in lines. The trick is to keep these lines moving as steadily and as imperceptibly as possible, so that the passengers never get to

put down their bags, or, better still, must immediately pick them up again. This “Check-in-Shuffle” also looks a lot better than the “Baggage Jerky.”

3. With regard to announcements, do not follow the airlines’ lead. These people talk too much, too loudly, and, especially, too clearly. Consider the following alternatives: First, forbid announcements altogether. Research has shown that people who miss their planes buy more airport merchandise than people who do not. Second, allow announcements only where the acoustics are especially bad. (This leaves considerable room for maneuver in airports.) Third, encourage announcements so numerous that they all blend into one continuous blast. Chicago’s O’Roar Airport is to be especially commended in this regard.

Rules for not getting to the gate

1. Design the course to the gate much like the North American aboriginals welcomed their prisoners; simply replace the tomahawks with stores. Where the space for stores is limited, consideration should be given to the elimination of one or more runways.
2. Do not tamper with Security Control; its present status is about as perfect as it is ever going to get. Most airports have by now installed the new “Either/Or” equipment. On the “hair-trigger” setting, these machines can pick up a penny; on the “Pb” setting, an empty foot-long artillery shell

smelling of gunpowder gets through.¹ The former setting is to be preferred, not for safety reasons—that is the airlines’ problem—but because it provides unlimited opportunities to humiliate the passengers. After they have emptied their pockets and removed their coats, shoes, glasses, and pistols, and still fail the test, send them through once more without their belts. When the buzzer goes off again, announce that the zipper in their pants is causing the problem.

3. Where the distances to the gates are short, consideration can be given to the installation of moving sidewalks, but only after all of the possibilities for shopping have been thoroughly exhausted (not to mention all of the passengers). In England, where people are trained to stand on the right, design the belts to be one centimeter wider than two carts. Elsewhere, wider sidewalks are acceptable, since they give everyone a chance to spread out.
 4. Gate area design has always been an awful problem. The trick is to limit the number of seats and
1. It's me, Your Author again. Sorry to interrupt. I cannot imagine how they found out. I participated in a ceremony in Sweden once, in which they shot off such a shell, which they then gave to me as a memento. A few days later, for reasons I cannot remember (maybe I was doing a security check of security checks), it was in my hand luggage as I left an unnamed Channel Island that sounds like a cow. Those several pounds of metal passed the search undetected. Most reassuring. (True, it was only a hand search. Maybe they thought it was a milk container.)

post signs reading: “Seating for passengers and their hand luggage.” Problems have been reported in these places during the long delays caused by weather disturbances. How low can these passengers get? Immediate steps must be taken to replace all carpeting with volcanic pumice.

5. We favor these new shuttle vehicles over the old skyways: they provide two additional periods of waiting. Shape these vehicles like a pear, so that most of the space is at the back. To those passengers who fail to see the logic of standing well back, so as to allow everyone else to board the plane first, rent boxing gloves.

Rules for not getting them back

1. They all come back, you know. Just as things that go up must come down, people who go out must come back in. Here toilets are to be avoided wherever necessary. Plumbing is a messy business. Where these must be supplied, hide them in obscure corners. For every male urinal, supply exactly one female stall. The women can thus learn to hurry up and not keep their male companions waiting.
2. We suggest that the little cubicles now used for currency exchange be replaced by camel-skin tents, within which specially trained people can say things like: “For you, for that lovely little pound, I propose \$1.25—Canadian. That is my next-to-final offer.” An automatic teller machine can be installed in a village near the airport.

3. Bear in mind that visitors’ first impression of your country will be formed at Immigration Control, so great care must be taken in designing this area. Three models have become well established, each wonderfully representative of its own culture. (There is a fourth that we reject unequivocally.)
 - *B: The British Cue Model.* Britain is, of course, the land of the queue. These people love to line up, even when they have nowhere to go. British airport queues are carefully designed to snake back and forth until they are ready to dispense their passengers to the immigration officers, all lined up to one side. A passenger notices an officer coming free and makes a move. At this point, The Hand appears, and clamps the shoulder. It belongs to the Guardian of the Immigration Gate, who says “Number 141, please.” If the passenger says, “But number 14 is coming up and it’s only a three-minute walk away,” s/he is punished by having to wait for number 144, where the officer is processing a family of fourteen from Afghanistan. This, you see, is one queue that can only be left on cue.
 - *F: The French Bypass Model.* In a certain manner of speaking, the model favored in France is more efficient. The line has been developed—well, evolved really—much like a funnel. The French do not appreciate long lines, so this one has been whittled down to three meters in length, although it has spread to 36 meters in width (the hall being 30 meters wide, its walls at each end 3 meters high).

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The thousands of people waiting to wave their passports at the uninterested immigration officials simply engage in that famous French sport known as *The Bypass*. They keep moving over to gain advantage over their compatriots. (In the French language, “crowd control” is an oxymoron.) This, of course, poses a problem for those people in the middle. But that hardly matters, since none of them are French. (Rumor has it that a couple has been trying to get to the front of the line at Disorly Airport for three months now. Brits apparently.)

- *A: The American Challenge Model.* The United States has faced a wholly different problem. Ever since the closing of Ellis Island, a search has been under way for another method to process immigrants. The solution worked out at New York’s John F. Naughty Airport is brilliant. America being the land of survival of the fittest, this very concept has been designed right into the arrival lines at Naughty. Government officials need no longer even screen the incoming passengers. Anyone who actually makes it to the front of an immigration line at Naughty Airport is automatically granted citizenship on the spot.
- *C:* We stand unalterably opposed to a fourth model—so much so, we refuse to italicize it, let alone give it capital letters: the canadian separatist model. Like so much else in that unfortunate country, this form of crowd control may work perfectly well in practice, but it simply does not work in

Rules for Designing the Perfect Airport

theory. As people arrive, in typical Canadian fashion they are allowed to separate into various lines. When English and French-speaking Canadians end up in the same line, and talk about pain and pois(s)on, nobody can tell whether they ate well or had a terrible time. Moreover, people are continuously separating from one line and joining another. No clamping, no bypassing, no challenge. Why can’t Canada just behave itself and copy Britain, France, or America, as it always has?²

4. Passengers lucky enough to get past immigration control face the incomparable joy of baggage arrival. This is delightful chaos, with passengers lined up every which way, breaking toes and ankles as they leap in to save their luggage as it comes crashing down. What a disgraceful waste. We urge every airport to set up coliseum seating in this area and sell tickets as well as popcorn and raw meat. Imagine the roar of the crowd as one of those traviators grabs a great bag and engages in that famous “Samson swing.”
5. Never keep anyone waiting for luggage who has nothing else to do. Always keep everyone waiting for luggage who is in a desperate hurry. The latter can be identified by their incessant use of mobile telephones, the former by their habit of waving, throwing kisses, and acting out the events of their entire vacation to the admiring crowd behind the fogged-up window.
2. It just did!

6. Make sure that the Customs Office trains its inspectors never to stop anyone wearing a shirt and tie. Such people would never dream of doing anything dishonest. In the presence of a label that reads “Diplomatic Corps,” Customs officers must be instructed to turn around and cover their eyes with both hands.³
 7. Priorities must be established among the various available forms of ground transportation. Car rental companies come first: they pay good rent. Buses come last: they must stop at the extreme end of the terminal building. Train the bus drivers, when asked if their bus goes to this or that place, to mumble “Maybe.” (They learn this very quickly.) In between come the taxis, which offer a golden opportunity for that famous double whammy: by having the cabs load one at a time, passengers can be made to wait significant
3. Me, one last time. This one is too good to miss. I rarely get stopped at customs; I must not look dangerous, even without a tie. But once I did get stopped, and it can teach us all an instructive lesson. Remember that shell in a previous footnote, the one that smelled of gunpowder? Well, I was in that Channel Island that sounds like a cow, not to wash my money, but to go sailing. We ran into a slight breeze of several hundred kilometers an hour and nobody warned me about the dangers of going below deck. So I went there to spray paint the cabin, but not in a color anyone appreciated, as well as some of my clothing. I had to leave for Canada right after that—no time to wash what did need laundering. Asked by the Canadian customs inspector what I had in the bag that he was in the process of opening, I told him. He thanked me profusely, sealed it tight, and sent me on my way immediately. You might consider this the next time you find yourself stopped at customs.

fractions of hours for taxis that themselves have been waiting significant numbers of hours.

On this happy note, we complete our Rules for Designing the Perfect Airport. We apologize for having gone to such lengths, but airports, you no doubt appreciate, require a great deal of Management—as does everything else on the face of this earth (and off it, for that matter).

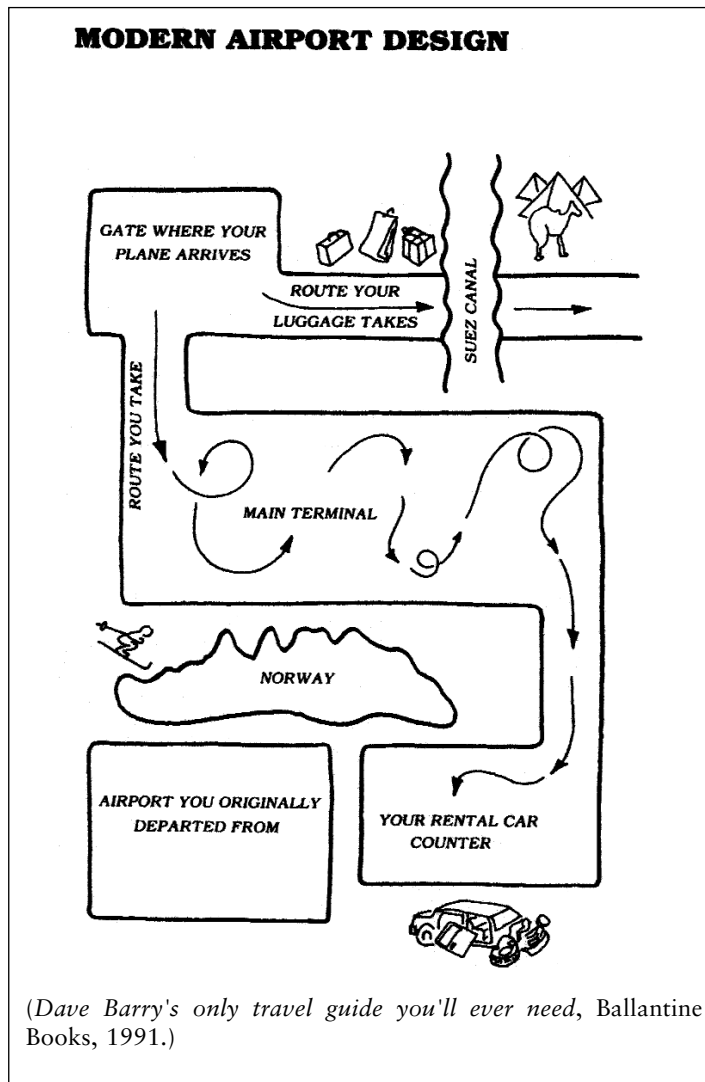
Modern airport security

At New York’s Naughty Airport today, an individual later discovered to be a public school teacher was arrested trying to board a flight while in possession of a ruler, a protractor, a set square, and a calculator.

Authorities believe he is a member of the notorious al-Gebra movement. He is being charged with transporting weapons of math instruction.

(Daryl DuLong's "Upbeat and Downstairs" website, www.daryld.com.)

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14



What exactly is the problem here? I mean, how does all this happen? Airline managers fly, don't they? Airport managers use airports too, even if only to get to their offices.

Does anyone here remember E-stern Airlines? Please raise your hand, if your arthritis is not too bad. It used to be the biggest airline in the world. Stock market analysts will pull out all kinds of fancy graphs to tell you what went wrong. Don't believe a number of it. E-stern went belly up because of the scrambled eggs.

"You've got to be kidding," I tell the flight attendant who has just served me these things they call scrambled eggs on a morning flight from Montreal to New York. "I've never eaten anything this bad, even on an airplane."

"I know," she says, "We keep telling them, they won't listen."

Now how can this be? Had these bosses been running

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a funeral home, I might understand. But flying is one business in which you can share your customers' experiences. If those bosses had bitten into those eggs just once, they would have been off the plane the next morning. So where was the big brass?

Did you guess? No, not off in space somewhere. While I was back here choking on those ostensible eggs, they were right up there in First Class, feasting away. "The biggest executive dining room in the world" is how the big boss of SASsy Airlines, in a moment of truth, once described First Class to me. He claimed that most of the occupants were there on airline business. What a good idea! Why go even Pampered Class when you can have a place in the plane all to yourself? With properly scrambled proper eggs.

Blimey Airways used to be careful about its scrambled eggs—and about reminding us that it was "The World's Favourite Airline" (among the stock analysts, at least, in the good old days, at least).

Once I was waiting at Haltrow Airport for my luggage. A Blimey Airways Marketing Research Person appeared with a clipboard. Oh-oh. I looked around for somewhere to hide, but all I could find was my cart. No bathroom in sight. She descended upon the passenger next to me. After a battery of banal questions came this little gem (and I quote precisely): "Was the pilot genuinely interested in the passengers?"

Why had I hidden? Why, for once, could it not have been me? "Marketing Research Person," I was dying to

Genuinely Scrambled Management

say, "was the Blimey pilot genuinely interested in flying the Blimey plane?" The guy who flew that Red Cross flight to N'gara was genuinely interested in flying the plane. He owned it. He was genuinely interested in the passengers too: he shared his bottled water with us. No Blimey pilot ever did that with me.

Another time, the Marketing Research Person descended on me. Haltrow was quiet—it must have been 3.00 am on a Friday the thirteenth. I had checked in quickly and was sitting all alone at the departure gate with too much time on my hands. I didn't see her coming until it was too late to hide under my cart.

Her questions were numerous, but every single one of them concerned the check-in. You might have thought she was interested in my reaction to it. Not at all. She was genuinely interested in circling numbers on her sheet of paper. Well into the ordeal, I blurted out in frustration: "Listen, the whole thing took maybe two minutes: we're already been here discussing it for more than ten." She would have none of this; she knew I had nowhere to go. After several more questions, I pleaded: "It wasn't awesome or awful; she took my ticket and gave me a boarding pass." Did the woman smile, she wanted to know. Actually her question was: "Did she smile naturally or was it a forced smile?" (If you think I am making any of this up, then you have never been Marketing Researched.)

So I tried another tack. "Well, you decide. Her cheeks were slightly rounded, her mouth was open the

The Flying Circus

compulsory millimeter or two, and she did make eye contact for that mandatory millisecond.” She glared at me and circled #3 on her sheet. “But her eyes did not sparkle,” I continued. “You must do something about this. Perhaps a special Eye Sparkling School next door to the Elocution School for pilots.” She did not compensate with her own eyes. Thankfully for both of us, my flight was called and I dashed away to give back that boarding pass.

I long for the day when I shall be descended upon by a Marketing Research Person who wants to talk about Marketing Research Persons.

Actually, I am genuinely interested in finding an airline that is *genuinely* interested in *us*—we the people they call *Customers*. One that smiles naturally upon us with sparkling corporate eyes.

To all the rest, I wish to say: “Who do you think you are, calling me a *Customer*? The nerve of you. I am a *person*, with endearing qualities and obnoxious ones. I love and hate, even love to hate (not hate to love), and more to the point, I can be loveable and hateable. You look at me—brown eyes, potentially shining, that can get glazed over, full of excitement or boredom—and all that you can see is *Customer*, or ‘Mr. Jackass,’ some means to maximize your Shareholder Value, at the expense of all other human values. You seem to think that you need to call me *Customer* to treat me decently. I think it demeans me.

“So, please, treat me as I deserve to be treated. Insult me if I insult you. (Boy, would that make flying interesting

Genuinely Scrambled Management

now!) At least that would show respect for me. Then I can respect you too. If you can see beyond *Customer*, maybe I’ll even be able to see beyond *Airline*.”

“It’s easy to make a small fortune in aviation. You start with a large fortune.”

(Appears widely on the Internet; original source unknown.)

At SkyHigh Airlines, sure we’re indifferent. But it’s a genuine indifference. That’s the key.

(www.skyhighairlines.com.)

Unscrambling one Management

MONTREAL, March 28, 2005. Air Maple Leaf, today announced that the Office of the President, CEO and the Chairman will be outsourced as of April 30, for the remainder of this fiscal year and beyond. Further savings in air travel are expected to add to Air Maple Leaf's bottom line.

"At the end of the day, the cost savings will be quite significant," says an Air Maple Leaf spokesperson who, with the aid of the company's outsourcing arm, has studied outsourcing extensively. "We simply can no longer afford this inefficiency and remain competitive in the world stage," he said.

Rahdpoor Nahassbaalapan, 23, of Indus Tele-services, Mumbai, India, will be assuming the Office of President, Chairman, and CEO as of May 1. He will receive a salary of \$360 Canadian a month with proportionate benefits. Mr. Nahassbaalapan will maintain his office in India and will be working primarily at night, due to the time difference between Canada and India.

"I am excited to serve in this position," Mr. Nahassbaalapan stated in an exclusive interview. "I always knew that my career at the Air Maple Leaf call center would lead to great things."

An Air Maple Leaf spokesperson noted that Mr. Nahassbaalapan has extensive experience in

public speaking and has been given the CEOs Script Tree to enable him to answer any question without having to understand the issue.

The Air Maple Leaf board continues to explore other outsourcing possibilities, including Air Maple Leaf's more than 100 vice presidents.

Air Maple Leaf employees were in a somber mood after the announcement. The company announced that counselors will be available all week to help employees get through the difficult time.

(Email that circulated in Montreal in the spring of 2005, apparently inspired by similar stories about the U.S. Presidency. Its authenticity, let alone source, could not be confirmed. Some names have been changed or removed to protect the guilty.)

15



So, would you really like to know why I, at least, love to hate flying? You seem to have been patient (apparently).

It all came out in a flight over Africa. Air Gaul, without a Ratched in sight. Such an innocent question, really. During breakfast. On top of dinner.

“Would you like the omelet or the poached eggs?” she asks pleasantly, with just a hint of sparkle in her eyes. She pronounces it clearly, even with all those extra words in French. Not “theomeletorthepoachedeggs.” Still, it hits me, right then and there. It’s those categories. Everything is so categorical up here in the sky. Even me. Especially me, like everyone else. Up here, I’m not a person. I’m a category.

Don’t get me wrong. I am not complaining that the airlines treat me like a number. Many never attain that level of individuality. I am a category, called *Passenger*, worse still, *Customer*. Even if they do sometimes call me “Mr. Jackass.”

Airlines are obsessed with categories. “Jamormarmalade,” “jamormarmalade,” “jamormarmalade” recited an attendant to everyone as she went down the aisle like some sort of dispensing machine. Then there are those categories for the miles—Gold, Elite, Chairman’s preferred (he never met us). And those categorical questions at check-in. “Have you left this bag unattended at any time since packing it?” (Yeah—it was in the back of the car on the way to the airport.) Worst of all are all those Management categories. “Addressing flight delays, cancellations and resulting consumer dissatisfaction,” a Reuters article (on 23 January 2001) quoting a U.S. Transportation Department report started happily enough, “will require a multifaceted approach, including new technology, airspace redesign and airport infrastructure enhancements.” Why don’t they just fix the airplanes and the airports?

There is a special word for organizations obsessed with categories: Bureaucracy. Bureaucracy is not about tape that is red or people that sit on their butts. Bureaucracy is about categories. Airlines are the most categorizing organizations off the face of the earth.

Bureaucracies are also about controls. And boy, is flying about controls—from the highways in, to the flying out, the herding, the squeezing, the checking, the selling. Imagine a ticket agent who smiles voluntarily, a pilot who is genuinely interested in keeping quiet, a skyway with paintings by the children of the ground staff.

The Flying Circus

If you read the airline magazines, you know that those great gurus of Management have declared bureaucracy dead. We live in the age of turbulence, they keep telling us. Actually, I haven't noticed. Things seem pretty calm up here in the sky, pretty calmly categorical. Maybe those gurus never travel in airplanes. Or else, as usual, they fly several miles higher than anyone else's experience. Down here, if nothing else, bureaucracy is alive and flying plenty high.

In my day job, when not flying, I study bureaucracy. There I am supposed to understand—be sympathetic, apologize for all this. I used to write things like “The larger the system, the more formalized its behavior” and “The more regulating the technical system, the more formalized the operating work, and the more bureaucratic the structure of the operating core.” Got it? (I can supply page references upon request.)

That means if we want it big, and we want it calm, we had better take it bureaucratic. And if we don't like Sardine Class, if we want to go like a dolphin, then maybe we should buy a wet suit.

So perhaps we shouldn't blame them, those flying people of the skies. They have to do it all, these Human Resources, flight after flight, day after day, “Passenger” after “Passenger.” It can numb the senses. Maybe we should instead celebrate those human beings of the airplanes and the airports who do all those wonderful operating things we never see, like executing the unbelievably complicated logistics that actually get loaded aircraft

Why I Really Hate Flying

off the ground, and bring them banging down safely in terrible weather, and just plain make flying so safe. Quite remarkable really.

And even more, let's celebrate those airline and airport people who can get past the capital M Management of those marketing and finance categories—past all that pretentiousness.

Like a Blimey flight attendant who turned up on my flight out of London the day after he was on my flight into London. He was genuinely interested in seeing “Mr. Mintzberg!”—a name he genuinely remembered. (Good thing I didn't register as Mr. Jack-ass.) He was even genuinely sorry that they were out of the newspaper that they were out of the day before. So here's to you, the human beings of flying who manage to remain human.

And this brings us back to that nice flight attendant on Air Gaul, the one with the omelet/or/poached/eggs over Africa. Still not a Ratched in sight.

I take the omelet. She smiles: I think she is genuinely interested in my choice. If so, she is a better person than I shall ever be. Then she asks if I want coffee or tea—“coffee/or/tea,” she says clearly—and when I reply “Neither,” she understands immediately. “Could I have some orange juice instead?” I ask. She tells me that I can have orange juice *and* coffee or tea. Wow! Then I get a brilliant idea. “Could I have two orange juices?” She smiles a genuine smile. So do I. I'll bet no one ever took two orange juices in an airplane before.

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So, here I sit, my omelet/and/veal/sausage framed by a glass of orange/juice on each side, feeling ever so individual. Can there be hope for flying after all?¹

Maybe not?

“We are delighted to welcome you on flight 123 to New York’s [Naughty] Airport. You should be pleased that you are part of a historic event, the first flight with passengers where all the pilot functions are performed by computer. No human is on the flight deck. [Not even a dog.] But, there is no need for concern. The systems have been carefully tested; everything is under control . . . control . . . control . . .”

(By Joe Podolsky, possibly from an earlier, unknown source.)

1. Not for Louis. When he read this, he said: "By the way, I thought I was the only one who goes for two juices." So now I go for three.

16



We are now arriving on Flight 1789 at Charlie the Gaul's Airport in Paris. As the plane comes to a screeching halt, all we sardines we leap up in unison, on cue, eager to become cattle again. All except me, who can't move because that featherhead in front of me is fumbling for his trunk. Why can't he hurry up? Finally, mercifully, he extracts it, and I go for mine, only to be glared at by that airhead behind. What's the rush, buddy?

I can't wait to get out of the can, the big one I mean. When I finally do, I discover to my horror that we have been herded into another can, one of those rectangular jobs. I wait by the front, lacing up my boxing gloves, while we all get packed in, last of all the guy who went back for his coloring book. I wait while we shuttle, rattle, and roll, to be regurgitated into the terminal. I wait, somewhere up that wall, to wave my passport at the uninterested immigration official, so that I can wait to do my Samson Swing, so that I can wait to sneak my boxes of

The Flying Circus

gold-plated gumdrops past the customs inspector, so that I can wait for the taxi that has been waiting for me.

Finally, I climb in and stretch out, reveling in my individuality, ecstatic in the knowledge that I am almost beyond their reach. We take off like a shot, whizzing past signs desperately trying to change my mind about consummate consumption, each one perfectly readable at several hundred kilometers an hour.

My excitement mounts in anticipation of what I seem to recall lies beyond. There is another world out there. I am sure of it.

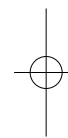
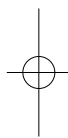
Just then, off cue, a hand appears out of the car in front. It is holding a great big wad of paper, which it drops, with ever so casual determination, right there, on the perfectly formed asphalt. There is an insignia on the back of that car. It reads "Aeroports de Paris."

There *is* hope for humanity, even in the world of flying.

Coming soon—
from the same hysterical author:

The Stapling Circus
Why We Love to Hate Refilling our Staplers

(unless you can wait for his sparkling
collection of short personal stories entitled
Reflections from the Window)



*THANK YOUS FROM
THE THIN AIR*

I wish to thank, first of all, the airlines and airports for providing me with such a rich source of materials. It wasn't easy, I am sure. I wish to thank Paul for working so creatively to keep my money out of their pockets. I wish to thank Victor Borges for the following line: I wish to thank Mom and Dad for making this possible and Susie and Lisa for making it necessary. (Just kidding, kids.)

I wish to thank Anne an' Ana for sitting next to me on airplanes when I was single, and Saša for relieving me of that condition and since sitting next to me everywhere else. Even on airplanes, Saša makes flying fun.

I wish to thank Joëlle for listening to most of this without always telling me what she really thought. I wish to thank Bill for listening to none of this and always telling me what he really thought (that I should keep my day job). I wish to thank Coralie for trying to tell me what I really thought.

The Flying Circus

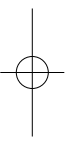
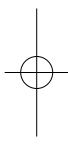
I wish to thank Frances, Harvey, Louis, Kunal, Gordon, Stan, Lee, Joe, and Saša for their noble, though futile, efforts to save this book from going over the edge, and Mitch, Nancy, and Joe (again) for trying to push this book further over the edge. I wish to thank Santa for rendering this manuscript in a form that could be foisted on a suspecting public and Gui for digging in the dirt of the thin air to find so many of the little gems that come at the ends of the chapters.

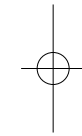
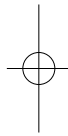
I wish to thank Hans, first for keeping this book in the air while it was grounded, then for introducing me to David, Myles, and Martin, who propelled this book into hard cover, and finally for throwing a party where I met Martin again, who propelled it into its current form. Thank you Martin. Watch your luggage.

Almost finally, I wish to thank those valiant workers of the flying world who maintain some semblance of sanity over and above all that insanity on the ground, not to mention having to deal with passengers up here the likes of me.

Finally, somewhere up in the clouds, I wish to thank the likes of me, without whom the book you see before you could not possibly have been written. Any errors that remain are the fault of the profreader.

Notes for Why You Love to Hate Flying





We are sorry to have left you so little space for this.

