

## TRAVELLING BY AIR

Airplanes are obviously a much more comfortable conveyance than covered wagons, but hurtling around the world in a metal box can have its unpleasant moments.

### Space Limitations

One obvious problem is lack of space. This does vary considerably from airline to airline, and from airplane model to airplane model. If you travel a lot, you might want to sample different airlines and airplanes to determine your preferences.

If you are very tall, you may prefer an aisle seat. This will hopefully give you a chance to stretch your legs into the aisle from time to time. Even better is to get a "bulkhead seat": there is usually more legroom in those positions. Be advised, however, that those seats go quickly; it pays to book ahead!

Oddly, something that helps you feel less cramped is to travel with a friend instead of alone. The better you are acquainted with someone, the harder it is to have your "personal space" violated.

### Air Sickness

If you get motion sick easily, you may be more comfortable if you take some sort of motion sickness drug before you fly. Note that you **must** take the drugs *before* you get sick; there is unfortunately nothing that I know of that will relieve motion sickness once it has started.

My personal drug of choice is Dramamine? (TM), a readily-obtained over-the-counter medication. Unlike Bonine? (TM), another over-the-counter drug, it tends to make one drowsy. I feel that this is a benefit on a long plane ride! Another motion sickness treatment (usually used for boating) is scopolamine patches. These patches go behind the ear, and usually have no noticeable side effects. I believe that in the USA, a prescription is required. Furthermore, there can be unpleasant side effects, such as dry mouth, blurry vision, and one other one that I forget. (Oh yeah - loss of memory.)

Motion sickness is caused in part by a discrepancy between what the eye sees and what the inner ear feels. (This is why the driver of a car gets sick much less frequently than a passenger: the driver is continuously watching the road, getting a good idea of what is coming next.) It may help to close your eyes the moment you start to consider thinking about getting airsick.

If you do come down with discomfort, one relatively easy but embarrassing way to feel better is to empty your stomach. "Barf bags" are usually located in the pouch on the back of the seat in front of you. Frequently, using them reduces and/or eliminates the discomfort.

### Air Quality

The air that you breathe inside an airline cabin isn't nearly as good as what you will find most other places.

The cabin is pressurized, since the air is so thin at altitude. However, they don't pressurize it to sea level; it is substantially weaker. (This is part of why air travel can be so draining; you can end up with mild altitude sickness!)

Furthermore, the air is very very dry. This can lead to dehydration, which can also make you feel lousy. I strongly advise bringing a litre or two of water with you, and guzzling that non-stop throughout the trip.

Finally, the air is filled with the exhaust products of your fellow travelers. One of these can be cigarette smoke; while smoking has been banned on domestic US flights, such rules are not followed around the globe. Although it might horrify some Americans, not all countries even mandate separate smoking sections!

Another exhaust product is germs. Because airplane tickets are so expensive, and because such effort is involved in making such a trip, people will fly sick. If your immune system is compromised in any way (HIV, chemotherapy, immunoglobulin deficiency), you may well want to wrap your face in a scarf or wear a surgical mask.

## Temperature

Because of the altitude, airplanes can also be quite cold (especially the floor). I *always* take a jacket with me on the plane and take one of the blankets that the airline provides. Wool socks are not a bad idea either. On the larger planes, there is usually a little fan that blows on you. The airflow can be adjusted by twisting the unit.

## Noise

Planes are also very noisy. You might not think this is a big deal, but it wears away at you. Consider bringing some earplugs with you.

Most of the large jets have sound systems built-in. Many of the newer planes also have built-in TV systems for movies and infomercials. Usually, you have to pay a small fee (generally around five US dollars) to rent headphones if you want sound. Be advised that the sound quality will NOT rival that of a compact disk player: the tapes get played over and over again, and the lack of fidelity can pain a purist.

You can bring portable tape and/or compact disk players aboard with you, but airlines may restrict their use (especially on takeoff and landing). There is some concern that the electromagnetic fields generated by consumer electronics can interfere with the airplane's navigational signals. I don't know if these concerns have been empirically substantiated, but I don't care. I'd rather be bored than in a plane crash.

## Food

Food on airlines is about what you would expect, considering that all the food must be prepared ahead of time and served to a large number of people with very

different taste preferences. It is amazing that the food is as good as it is, but still, it frequently will not please you.

U.S. carriers are pretty good about accommodating standard dietary preferences, but you have to help them out. If you are vegetarian or keep kosher, tell your travel agent when you purchase the ticket, and the airlines will usually accommodate you.

If you have food allergies, you are probably safest bringing your own food with you. (In fact, even if you eat anything, you are probably better off bringing your own food with you!) Be advised that many countries have import restrictions on foods; If you bring food, be sure that you either finish it all on the plane or make sure that it will clear customs.

Morley Selver suggests never getting on an airplane hungry. You might think you will get a meal shortly, but the following could happen: 1) Everyone boards the aircraft, then they decide they have to fix something. They are not sure how long it will take, therefore nobody is allowed off. 2) You take off on a 3 hour flight that has 2-1/2 hrs of turbulence where the flight crew is not allowed to serve meals. 3) You do not like the food. 4) There is an electrical problem with the galley and your half of the plane does not get a meal. The best bet is to eat before you get on or take something you can snack on (e.g. a granola bar). If you take two, you may be able to sell one for \$10.00. :-)

See also Diana Fairechild's [Airplane Meals](#).

## **Fear Of Flying**

Most people have a fear of heights. This is a reasonable survival trait! However, when coupled with extreme media coverage of disasters, this can lead to very debilitating fear of flying. Furthermore, for many people, not having any control of the plane makes the fear worse. This is not unlike how one usually worries more as a passenger in a car than as a driver of a car.

This is not necessarily a *rational* fear, if looked at in the context of all possible hazards. There are far fewer fatalities per airline passenger-mile than there are per automobile driver-mile. This is probably due in part to the fact that someone else is doing the driving, and that someone else has been extremely well trained, is not tired, is not drunk, and has a backup in case he or she spills coffee in his or her lap.

Knowing a little bit about aerodynamics can sometimes reduce your anxiety. Despite what we all learned from watching Saturday morning cartoons, you do not hang in the air until you look down, you can not run into and become part of a painting, and, in particular, you do not go straight down the moment you run out of speed. Cartoon Laws Of Motion do **not** apply in The Real World.

Even if airplanes flew like bricks, the plane would cover quite a few horizontal miles were it to fall. But planes are not bricks, they are sideways sails. Lift is generated by the forward motion of the plane, so the plane does not even fall as fast as a brick. In the time that it takes for the airplane to get to the ground, the pilots have quite a bit of time to search around for a convenient highway to land on. Captain Tom Bunn, who is both an airline captain and a licensed therapist, tells me that a 747 at cruising

altitude that lost all power to all engines would have about 132 miles to find a suitable road on which to make an emergency landing. Captain Bunn is president of [SOAR](#), which counsels people with fear of flying.

(A friend of mine swears that the way to conquer fear of flying is to take soaring or hang-gliding lessons so you can *feel* the force of the lift. Windsurfing might also help.)

Furthermore, commercial jets always have at least two (and usually three) engines. The chances of two failing simultaneously are very very slim. So relax.

Personally, I lost all fear of flying after living close to an airport for a few years. The airplanes kept going up and they kept landing. They kept going up, and they kept landing. Over and over and over again, hundreds of times per day. And never once did a plane crash at that airport. This made me understand at a very visceral level just how safe air travel is.

If all this logic doesn't help you, join the ranks of thousands and do what they do: get drunk before you get on the plane! (Note: I got some pretty irate email from an airline steward complaining about how awful drunkards were to deal with on the plane. If you aren't a happy drunk, booze might not be the best relaxant.)

## **Jet Lag**

Jet lag is your body's way of asking you not to abuse it by upsetting its normal cycle. Basically, your body is used to falling asleep at certain times of the day. If you go waltzing across multiple time zones, your body doesn't much care: it still wants to fall asleep at its normal time, and it doesn't much care if it happens to be three in the afternoon.

There have been some studies that suggest that paying close attention to what you eat when can reduce the transition time; for example the Argonne National Laboratory has published a [Jet Lag Diet](#). For more on jet lag, see Diana Fairechild's [Jetlag](#).

Two good rules of thumb: it takes about one day per hour of time shift to totally get over jet lag. It is also much harder to travel east than it is to travel west.

## **Non-flights**

Occasionally, you will not be able to go out on your scheduled flight. Sometimes the bump will be because the passengers did not follow statistical means, and fewer people cancelled than the airline expected. In such cases, the airline will usually give you some sort of prize - free tickets or vouchers for travel on that airline.

Occasionally, the bump will be for safety reasons. In the past three years, I have been stuck on the ground because of fog, thunderstorms, a (apparently false) smoke alarm, and an unresponsive backup rudder motor. I don't mind these delays at all. I'd rather be late to Chicago than the late Kate Sherwood!

If you are stuck somewhere overnight because of something that was the fault of the airline, they will usually furnish you with a hotel room, breakfast, and the first flight out in the morning. If you are stuck somewhere because of the weather, that's your own problem. Either you hang out in the airport (another good reason to bring food with you!) or you impose upon your great-step-half-aunt Martha that you haven't seen in seventeen years.

If you miss a flight because of your own stupidity (like yakking for too long with Aunt Martha), most airlines will help you out if it doesn't inconvenience them too much. For discount airlines like Southwest, however, you'd better make sure you don't miss your flight!

Morley Selver notes that if you are waiting to board a flight and it is suddenly cancelled, there will be a race to the next airline counter to try to get on the next flight. Instead of following the sheep to the counter, head for the nearest phone and phone the airline reservations system. You get the same result without standing in line.

## **Pets**

You can ship your pets on an airline, but you need to put the animal in a special animal container. Flying can be pretty traumatic for people, who know what is going on and asked for it; imagine what your poor pet is going through!

**NOTE! Alert reader Robin Fingerson tells me that almost all vets recommend strongly AGAINST tranquilizing pets in aircraft, especially in the hold. In some breeds with short noses, they can suffer breathing problems and other side effects.**

Some countries have really strict pet quarantines. Island nations (e.g. Britain, New Zealand) and particularly paranoid about rabies, and require quarantines that are a significant fraction of a pet's lifetime.

Shawn, Ian, Gus and Oxo Jaquiss sent me email with great info about [travelling with pets](#).

## **Special Circumstances**

There are some things beyond your control, and airlines actually have some flexibility in these circumstances.

If you are ill, you can usually cancel or reschedule your flight. You will need a note from your doctor and to fill out a number of forms at an airline office.

If you are flying to a funeral of a relative, many airlines will waive the advance purchase restrictions on fares, resulting in much cheaper tickets. You will need to tell the airline the name of your relative, your relationship to the dearly departed, and the name and phone number of the dearly departed's funeral home.