

In-flight Entertainment



**Tales of Sex,
Rage and
Queasiness at
30,000 feet**

*'Tighten your
seatbelt and
assume the brace
position. This is the
flight attendant's
revenge!'*

Lonely Planet



Elliott Hester



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Queasiness at 30,000 Feet**

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In-flight
Entertainment

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Well, Mom, I finally became a writer. Forgive me for not growing up.

*Bad trips are wonderful as long as they happen to other people.
We all love travel misadventure stories, partly because they make
us laugh, but mainly because they could have happened to us
and didn't—at least not this time around.*

—Douglas McArthur
The Globe and Mail, Toronto

Introduction

I never wanted to be a flight attendant.

I never fantasized about slinging chicken and beef at thirty thousand feet. Never dreamed of wearing a polyester-wool uniform, working fourteen-hour days, being cussed at by business flyers, puked on by kids, swung on by air ragers, poked by the elderly and subjected to the rueful drone of pilots reminiscing about simpler days when they flew C-130 military cargo planes and had yet to sign an alimony check. I never aspired to any of this. At least not until freezing my ass off in the winter of '85.

That January, during one of the nastiest subzero streaks in Chicago's history, I worked outside as a part-time baggage handler for a second-rate airline at the world's busiest airport. Relegated to the graveyard shift, I'd show up at the O'Hare ramp dressed in layered clothing suitable for the Alaskan Ididerod: long underwear, polypropylene sweats, extra-thick wool army fatigues, a turtleneck pullover, heavy sweater, three-quarter-length parka, insulated work boots, insulated gloves, an insulated jock strap and a wool skull cap. When the temperature really plummeted, I put on a ski mask and goggles.

For a moment, try to imagine me on the airport tarmac, dressed in the aforementioned igloo wear and standing beneath the belly of a Boeing 727. Imagine a night when the windchill factor knocks the temperature down to 64 degrees below zero. Imagine crystals of my own frozen breath, clinging around the mouth hole of my ski mask as

I turn to the luggage cart, bend forward, lift a forty-pound piece of passenger luggage and toss it onto a belt loader that angles up to the 727's cargo compartment. Imagine a gust of ice-cold wind rushing up my pant leg, past the insulated jockstrap—instantly reducing my testicles to the size of cocktail peanuts. Imagine my aching back, after I've lifted and tossed the 527th passenger bag of the night. Now try to imagine the condition of *your* Samsonite, my 528th, once I've snatched it from the baggage cart, raised it above my head and slammed it onto the belt loader in an act of primal fury.

On one such night—as arctic winds roared up my pant leg, as yet another piece of luggage flew from my frostbitten fingers—I looked up, squinted through my ski goggles and gazed upon a flight attendant through an airplane window. She was sitting in a passenger seat, sipping something warm and steamy from a Styrofoam cup. Waiting, no doubt, for the throng of passengers with whom she would soon fly away to Mexico City. She looked down at me and waved. It was a short, sad wave. The kind of wave offered by an inmate's wife, when visiting hours have ended at Rikers Island.

Perhaps it was the late hour (1 A.M.), or the muscle fatigue (everything—including my glutes—ached), or the fact that hypothermia was about to set in—whatever the reason, I stood there, shivering, mesmerized by the look of pity on her face. A look that, in turn, made me feel sorry for myself. That's when the cold, hard hand of common sense reached out and slapped me in the face.

Why the hell was I slaving on the frozen airport tundra with a bunch of guys like Vic and T-Bone, when I could be working *inside* the airplane with long-legged coworkers named Audrey and Monica and Priscilla Jean? Why was I still living in Chicago, the Siberia of the Midwest, when I could be based in Miami or Los Angeles? There was nothing to keep me here in the Cold and Windy City. No wife. No illegitimate kids. No mortgage payments. I suddenly realized that this was my chance to get out of town before I found myself stuck in an O'Hare-area suburb, buried beneath a familial snow drift from which I could never dig out.

A few months after this bone-chilling epiphany, I found myself at

the headquarters of a major U.S. airline, immersed in a five-week flight-attendant training program.

Simply put, training was five weeks of hell. Five weeks of sharing a dormitory room with four male trainees—one snored like a drunken cartoon character, another argued with his mother in his sleep. Five weeks of listening to Stalinist lectures about the common good of the company and the importance of teamwork. Five weeks of practicing airplane evacuation procedures, of contemplating the great complexities of in-flight food service, of performing mouth-to-mouth resuscitation on truncated mannequins, of worrying about being kicked out for one of a variety of indiscretions. (One of my roommates crashed and burned for laughing too loud in the hallway.) It was five long weeks of sympathizing with more than fifty women who were forced to wear prodigious amounts of makeup. “Lipstick should be bright enough to be seen from across a large room.” This lipstick mandate—held as near to the hearts of airline grooming instructors as the Second Amendment to NRA devotees—left some women feeling like circus clowns.

“I can’t wait till the day I get off probation,” I heard one of them say. “This crap is coming right off.”

Jasmine, one of only a handful of African-American trainees, was forced to dye her red hair black. The grooming coordinator, an alleged style expert who hailed from the trend-setting metropolis of Waxahachie, Texas, apparently believed that a black woman with natural red hair was a walking fashion faux pas. Even if this particular black woman had the freckles to match.

The grooming coordinator managed to spread her ignorance beyond racial boundaries as well. Compelled to have her white locks homogenized to a more “appropriate” shade, Cynthia, a platinum blonde from Los Angeles, found herself at the mercy of an inexperienced airline stylist. After a screw-up in chemical application, the green-haired Californian was last seen running from the training center in tears.

Because hair and makeup issues rarely concern men, I managed to escape the scrutiny of the backwoods grooming Gestapo. Nevertheless, I learned to buff my fingernails to a luster that would make Richard Simmons proud. Although I failed one or two exams, screwed up the

meal service during “simulated flight,” and got caught kissing a horny coed (her redneck townie boyfriend would have shot us both had he known what happened the following night), I matriculated from the Charm Farm and was shipped off to New York.

That’s where I began earning my stripes as an in-flight bartender/referee/therapist.

Human behavior is rarely more incomprehensible than when witnessed on an airplane at thirty thousand feet. Passengers have been known to freak out or act up for a variety of reasons: turbulence, fear of flying, too much alcohol, not enough sense, or because they’re stuck for hours in a crowded metal tube equipped with smelly lavatories, lousy food and seats best suited for Danny Devito and family. These conditions can turn even the most sophisticated travelers into airborne newborns that flight attendants, despite our best efforts, have difficulty trying to appease.

In sixteen years of flight service, I’ve flown to nearly one hundred destinations in twenty-three countries and seen more than my share of in-flight theatrics. I once saw a drunken couple puke on each other until they looked as if they’d emerged from a pool of oatmeal. I watched a smug-faced man receiving high-altitude fellatio from a woman he’d just met on the flight. I witnessed a daring heist in which five hundred thousand dollars was stolen from a 727. I’ve seen full-blown airplane brawls, passenger stampedes, a flight attendant in the midst of a nervous breakdown, passengers in various stages of undress, and stressed-out flyers attempting to open the emergency exit six miles above the Atlantic.

Having dealt with these problems for nearly two decades, having ducked punches and calmed nerves and gazed sullenly as yet another passenger whipped out his willy and peed in front of startled frequent flyers, I’ve come to the conclusion that at least 2 percent of the traveling public is certifiably insane (the percentage is slightly higher for airline crew). With approximately 650 million people traveling annually on U.S. airlines and more than one hundred thousand flight attendants to serve them, many of us, at one time or another, will be caught in the grip of plane insanity.

The narratives appearing on the following pages are lowlights from

my sixteen-year career in the air. All names have been changed (and in many cases, locations) to grant privacy to passengers and crew, and to make identifications as difficult a task as trying to clear customs at Miami International Airport.

If you question the veracity of these stories, simply pack this book in a carry-on bag and take it on your next flight. After the attendants finish with the food and beverage service, once they've disappeared behind the galley curtain to gobble up the leftover entrées, get up from your seat (even if the seat belt sign is on), walk to the galley and poke your head through the curtain. Be afraid. Be very afraid. But after they realize you don't want another Coke and that you want to give *them* something instead, the daggers will fall from their eyes. Show the book, point to a story and ask, "Has this ever happened to you?" As my colleagues begin to flip through the pages, you will hear the unbridled chuckle of commiseration. Mechanical delays, flight cancellations, boarding fiascoes, ballistic passengers—the stories are as wild and as varied as the crew members who tell the tale. From our perspective, the majority of flights reach their destination without major incident. But the remaining trips are rife with drama and absurdity—the likes of which will make you shake your head and sigh.

So welcome aboard, my frequent-flying friend. The plane is packed, the skies will be turbulent and you're stuck in a center seat in the next-to-last row of coach. To your left, a screaming infant squirms upon the lap of an indifferent mother. A businessman the size of a sumo wrestler is wedged into the seat on your right. You're cramped, hungry, suicidal. There's a foul stench drifting overhead. That's when you notice the guy in back just pushed his bare foot between the seats so that it's stretched out on *your* armrest—bunions, toe-jam and all. The flight attendants have faces like prison guards. The captain's P.A. announcements drive spikes through your skull. You can't sit back, can't relax, can't enjoy the friggin' flight because it's thirty minutes past departure time, the hydraulic system is busted and the airplane is still at the gate, waiting for mechanics who are threatening to go on strike. Forget about your connection in Chicago. Better pray your luggage doesn't get lost. This ain't no flight through the friendly skies, my friend.

This is the flight from hell.

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the Globe 221

ONE **Bad Trips** -----✈

American fined for flight urinating

AMSTERDAM, Netherlands, Aug. 5 (Associated Press) – Two intoxicated men, including one American, were fined \$480 for urinating on passengers and airplane seats while aboard separate flights to Amsterdam, officials said Thursday.

The two incidents happened over the past two weeks on flights by the same airline. Police would not name the carrier or the men, in line with privacy regulations.

While waiting 26 hours in Cairo on July 25 for a flight to the Dutch capital, a Norwegian man consumed excessive amounts of whiskey and vodka, military police spokeswoman Marcha Muller said.

“Once airborne, the man felt the urge to relieve himself and dampened the three nearest seats,” Muller said.

A few days later on July 29, an American passenger drank eight cans of beer while airborne before letting down his pants, stumbling through the aircraft with a glass of ale in his hand and finally urinating over three seats and his neighbor’s sleeve.

Flight attendants overpowered the man, pulled up his trousers, and alerted authorities at Amsterdam’s Schiphol Airport, where military police are responsible for security.

Dutch military police fined the two men \$480 each for unruly behavior. The airline intends to press charges against the American for cleaning costs and disrupting fellow travelers with his “shocking behavior,” Muller said.

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1 Something Smelly in the Air

Speed and altitude notwithstanding, flying in a commercial jet is not much different than riding in a Greyhound bus. You pay a higher-than-expected round-trip fare, inch sideways down a narrow aisle, toss your carry-on in the overhead, squeeze into a tiny seat next to a stranger whose ass is as wide and unruly as the Australian outback, then try to read, sleep, or stare out the window until you pull into the terminal in Boise or Detroit. Despite advertising campaigns that suggest a level of comfort and attention one might expect aboard the *Queen Elizabeth II*, air travel, in its purest main-cabin form, is little more than public transportation. Greyhound at thirty thousand feet. Amtrak with wings.

As with most forms of public transportation, your travel experience is affected as much by the staff as the passengers sitting near you. At times, your seatmates can have an even greater impact. We've all sat next to someone who talked until our eardrums bled, who laughed obnoxiously while watching the in-flight movie or yammered on the telephone until we harbored thoughts of homicide. We've all endured the frequent-flying Goober who sucks his teeth, clips his dirty toenails (toenail shrapnel can be as foul as it is deadly), picks his nose unmercifully, or falls asleep and either drools from one corner of his mouth or snores with the vigor of a drunken wildebeest.

The more unfortunate among us have suffered worse. On one crowded flight or another, I've been victimized by flatulence—the stealthy, gaseous, repeated break of wind from a businessman who should never have eaten that burrito. An SBD (silent but deadly) can