

Leavin' on a jet plane

Well, for those of you who weren't in the Nebraska Union Monday, I'm going home to Germany for Christmas. Yes, Dad made me wait until eight days before my plane takes off to tell me I get to celebrate the holiday season with my family.

Since my family left Nebraska in 1985 to move to Texas and then to

Germany, going home has always been a big thing for me. I usually start counting down 50 or 60 days before my departure, about the time I begin to pack for the trip. Old roommates will vouch for me there, my suitcases took up all of the excess room in our humble abode. It's pretty obvious I don't get too excited about seeing my family, although it may just be the joy of getting out of Lincoln for awhile.

I unpack and repack, always sure I've forgotten something of vital importance. Do I need my blowdryer or does my sister still have one? Dad always tells me "pack lightly" but in my opinion, I need 60 or 70 cassette tapes even for a three-week break. And now that they live in cold weather as opposed to Texas weather,

I'm forced to try and cram a good number of sweaters into two suitcases, because that's how many the airplane people will let me check in. And because of lack of space, I usually have more than the allotted number of carry-on luggage -- two.

I remember one year taking two carry-on pieces of luggage, a purse, a skateboard and a stuffed animal onto the plane. The stewardesses did not especially care for the skateboard and made the whole trip pretty miserable.

As you can imagine, my suitcases are usually packed way past capacity. I pray when the plane lands that customs won't make me open them because I'm sure I'll never be able to get them shut again. The last time I flew in from Germany I was standing with some airport guy from Hungary or Czechoslovakia by the conveyor belt waiting for my luggage. It was taking quite a while and I made some comment that it probably exploded. The guy got this terrible look of fear on his face and said "exploded?" I had to explain that I had packed the suitcase so full that if the luggage people threw it, it would probably pop open spewing all of my clothes and tapes onto the tarmac. He understood and warned me of making other explosion comments in airport terminals. I guess it wasn't so funny.

I really didn't understand his fear because at the Frankfurt airport everyone is given the third degree about their luggage. "Is this your luggage? Did you pack it? Where did you pack it? When did you pack it? Did you leave the luggage anywhere unattended? Is there even the remotest possibility that someone could have put something into your luggage without you knowing it?" I don't know why they don't just open the stuff up and look inside. Probably because they know no one would be able to get it closed again.

The worst part about this luggage thing is carrying all of them at once through airports especially when coming back from Germany. Normally I catch a flight in Frankfurt and fly non-stop to Dallas or St. Louis and then catch a connecting flight. So, in Dallas or St. Louis everybody has to get off of the plane and wait for all of their luggage, take it through customs, hope to God nobody wants to see what's inside, then check it in again so that it can be put onto the connecting flight. It's terrible, especially for me, because I have to carry two pieces of luggage at 500 pounds a piece, two carry-on pieces of luggage, my tape case and my purse. By the time I get to my final destination, I'm so tired from carrying my luggage through so many airports I can hardly move.

I have been fortunate, however, in that I've never had my luggage lost. My Mom, on the other hand, had her luggage lost somewhere between Wichita, Kan. and Amsterdam. Air Norway eventually found the luggage and returned it to her.

There have been those more memorable trips, scary might even be a good word for them. A few years ago I was flying back to Lincoln from San Antonio and my flight ended up being five hours late. It was the same

summer Dallas had that terrible wind shear accident and about 150 people were killed and Ricky Nelson crashed somewhere in Texas (for some 'unknown' reason). I had to go from San Antonio to Houston, catch the connecting flight, and then go to Kansas City, and finally Omaha. Well, we got close to Houston and the weather wasn't so good -- wind shears. The pilot told us we couldn't land right away because all of the area runways were full with other planes that had made bad weather landings. So we circled, and we circled, and we circled.

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I remember telling the bald man with crutches sitting next to me "you know we're all going to die don't you?" (Still circling of course). Then the pilot told us we were "running out of fuel" and we had to go back to San Antonio. So we did, and we refueled, and we went back to Houston.

My connecting flight in Houston had been sitting on the ground for about three hours. And for those that don't know, when planes are grounded, the air conditioning is turned off so no one can smoke. Everybody on the plane looked like hell. Ties and buttons were undone, everybody was sweating, there were several nicotine attacks going on and it seemed as though everybody was drunk. The man from Kansas City sitting next to me was smashed and going a bit nuts. He said he hadn't had a cigarette in four hours and that the passengers neared mutiny when the stewardesses said they had run out of liquor. He told me the crew restocked the plane about half way through the grounding.

But there are some sad parts about flying. For some reason, airplane companies manage to either find all of the old movies I've already seen or all of the "worst" movies. For instance, I've seen Beverly Hills Cop II, The Natural, Beverly Hills Cop II again and Three Men and a Baby.

I really shouldn't complain though, these weren't really bad movies. Last semester my Dad flew to the states twice in one month. He said he had to watch *Ishtar* four times. I'll take Beverly Hills Cop II again. And seeing the movie is free -- hearing it will be four dollars please.

The only time I got to hear the movie free was on my way to Germany last Christmas. I reconnected in Minneapolis and we were delayed. It seems the crew was unable to locate one of the passengers, I believe his name was Mr. Stephens.

The pilot couldn't take off to Europe without Stephens because this man's luggage had already been loaded on and it would have to be unloaded if Stephens was not located. The stewardesses kept trying to find Stephens on the plane. I couldn't tell if they thought he was deaf or asleep

or simply didn't know his name, but they kept asking.

Then they got smart and paged Stephens in the terminal and low and behold they found him -- in one of the bars in the terminal. He was smashed and he had no idea we were waiting on him. But the delay caused by Stephens made the crew feel bad and they gave us our head sets free.

I smoke, so I can barely see the movie anyway because I'm in the very back row of the plane. But not being able to see the movie is not the worst part of sitting in the smoking section. You see those of us smokers that are daring enough to sit in the actual smoking area are constantly bombarded by all of the closet smokers and the smokers who don't want their clothes to smell.

It never fails, throughout the entire trip to Germany, people come back and ask me to play musical airplane seats with them so that they can smoke. Forget it, no way, this is my seat, I paid for it (or somebody did) and you can't sit in it. But they will later get you. They watch and wait for you to go to the bathroom and the minute you turn the bathroom lock to "occupied" anywhere from 10 to 12 people are up and racing down the plane's aisles towards your seat. I get out of the bathroom and there's an ugly dogpile of smokers in my seat. And don't think I don't throw a fit.

Now all you non-smokers stop laughing, you fail to remember that if and when a plane crashes it's those of us at the back of the plane with the best chance of survival, so there.

Of course there was one really bad part about this delay -- fidgety children and frustrated babies. Ultimately, that is the worst part about flying especially on long flights to Europe.

While we were waiting for Stephens to be found, a child a few seats away decided he just was not having a good time and he let the entire 747 know it. Worse yet, while the crew looked for Stephens, the plane's wings iced over and they had to be defrosted and that added to the delay.

We finally took off a half hour later and the child still wasn't happy. I had my Walkman on and I could still hear him. I remember saying out loud to myself "That child needs a glass of wine" and motioned with my glass towards him. The passenger on the other side of the aisle went to reach for my glass and said "I'll give it to him." Apparently I had spoken a little louder than I thought but at least I wasn't the only one annoyed.

Other than the luggage part of my trips, screaming children and delays I usually have a great time. I love to fly and I think it's because it's the only time I can travel really fast without getting a speeding ticket. I wonder if that's why Chuck Jaeger flew.

I get to leave Nebraska next Tuesday and connect in St. Louis probably with another five hour layover (my Dad will do anything to save ten dollars). But I'm not complaining, I'm just happy to be able to go home. Hopefully I will have another interesting plane trip, possibly one to write about.

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