

Cockpit Confidential: Everything You Need to Know About Air Travel: Questions, Answers, and Reflections

By Patrick Smith

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Cockpit Confidential: Everything You Need to Know About Air Travel: Questions, Answers, and Reflections By Patrick Smith

A New York Times bestseller

For millions of people, travel by air is a confounding, uncomfortable, and even fearful experience. Patrick Smith, airline pilot and author of the web's popular Ask the Pilot feature, separates the fact from fallacy and tells you everything you need to know...

- How planes fly, and a revealing look at the men and women who fly them
- Straight talk on turbulence, pilot training, and safety
- The real story on congestion, delays, and the dysfunction of the modern airport
- The myths and misconceptions of cabin air and cockpit automation
- Terrorism in perspective, and a provocative look at security
- Airlines, seating woes, and the pitfalls of airline customer service
- The colors and cultures of the airlines we love to hate

Cockpit Confidential covers not only the nuts and bolts of flying, but also the grand theater of air travel, from airport architecture to inflight service to the excitement of travel abroad. It's a thoughtful, funny, at times deeply personal look into the strange and misunderstood world of commercial flying.

It's the ideal book for frequent flyers, nervous passengers, and global travelers.

Refreshed and vastly expanded from the original *Ask the Pilot*, with approximately 75 percent new material.

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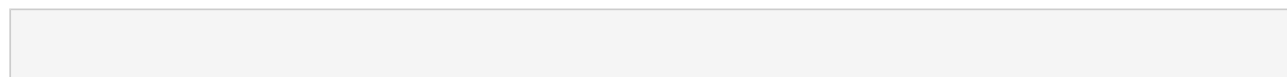
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Editorial Review

Review

"Brilliant...A book to be savored and passed to friends."

-- William Langewiesche, Vanity Fair

"Nobody covers the airline experience like Patrick Smith. He brings balance and clarity to a subject all too often over-hyped. And, he's a damned good writer."

-- Clive Irving, Conde Nast Traveler

"I wish I could fold up Patrick Smith and put him in my suitcase. He seems to know everything worth knowing about flying."

-- Stephen Dubner, coauthor of Freakonomics

"Patrick Smith is extraordinarily knowledgeable about modern aviation, and communicates beautifully in English, not in pilot-ese. The ideal seatmate, companion, writer and explainer."

-- Alex Beam, Boston Globe

"A brilliant writer, Patrick Smith provides a laugh-a-page tour of a misunderstood industry -- a journey into the world of aviation, stripped of the mumbo-jumbo and filled with humor and insight."

-- Christine Negroni, aviation correspondent and author of Flying Lessons

"Patrick Smith doesn't just know everything about air travel, he possesses a rare knack for explaining it in lucid and witty prose."

-- Barbara Peterson, Condé Nast Traveler

"Patrick Smith is one of the best writers around, period, which certainly makes him by far the best writer ever to have earned a commercial pilot's license. A soaring accomplishment, indispensable for anyone who travels by air, which means everyone."

-- James Kaplan

"Wonderful"

-- Rudy Maxa

"Patrick Smith manages to demystify the experience and remind us of the magic of aviation. Also he has a great sense of humor -- which is critical when you are wedged into seat 14D on a regional jet."

-- Chris Bohjalian

"Brilliantly down to earth and reassuring"

-- Cath Urquhart, The Times (London)

"What a pleasure it is reading Patrick Smith's surprisingly elegant explanations and commentary. The world needs somebody writing E.B. White simple and sensible about a topic everyone has a question about."

-- Berke Breathed

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-- Barbara Peterson,

Condé Nast Traveler "Cockpit Confidential is the document that belongs in the seat-back pocket in front of you."

-- David Pogue, New York Times correspondent and PBS television host

About the Author

Patrick Smith is an airline pilot, air travel writer, and the host of www.askthepilot.com. He has visited more than seventy countries and always asks for a window seat. He lives in Somerville, Massachusetts.

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Introduction

The Painter's Brush

More than ever, air travel is a focus of curiosity, intrigue, anxiety, and anger. In the chapters that follow I will do my best to provide answers for the curious, reassurance for the anxious, and unexpected facts for the deceived.

It won't be easy, and I begin with a simple premise: everything you think you know about flying is wrong. That's an exaggeration, I hope, but not an outrageous starting point in light of what I'm up against. Commercial aviation is a breeding ground for bad information, and the extent to which different myths, fallacies, and conspiracy theories have become embedded in the prevailing wisdom is startling. Even the savviest frequent flyers are prone to misconstruing much of what actually goes on.

It isn't surprising. Air travel is a complicated, inconvenient, and often scary affair for millions of people, and at the same time it's cloaked in secrecy. Its mysteries are concealed behind a wall of specialized jargon, corporate reticence, and an irresponsible media. Airlines, it hardly needs saying, aren't the most forthcoming of entities, while journalists and broadcasters like to keep it simple and sensational. It's hard to know who to trust or what to believe.

I'll give it my best shot. And in doing so, I will tell you how a plane stays in the air, yes. I'll address your nuts-and-bolts concerns and tackle those insufferable myths. However, this is not a book about flying, per se. I will not burden readers with gee-whiz specifications about airplanes. I am not writing for gearheads or those with a predisposed interest in planes; my readers don't want to see an aerospace engineer's schematic of a jet engine, and a technical discussion about cockpit instruments or aircraft hydraulics is guaranteed to be tedious and uninteresting—especially to me. Sure, we're all curious how fast a plane goes, how high it flies, how many statistical bullet points can be made of its wires and plumbing. But as both author and pilot, my infatuation with flight goes beyond the airplane itself, encompassing the fuller, richer drama of getting from here to there—the “theater” of air travel, as I like to call it.

For most of us who grow up to become airline pilots, flying isn't just something we fell into after college. Ask any pilot where his love of aviation comes from, and the answer almost always goes back to early childhood—to some ineffable, hard-wired affinity. Mine certainly did. My earliest crayon drawings were of planes, and I took flying lessons before I could drive. Just the same, I have never met another pilot whose formative obsessions were quite like mine. I have limited fascination with the sky or with the seat-of-the-pants thrills of flight itself. As a youngster, the sight of a Piper Cub meant nothing to me. Five minutes at an air show watching the Blue Angels do barrel rolls, and I was bored to tears. What enthralled me instead were the workings of the airlines: the planes they flew and the places they went.

In the fifth grade I could recognize a Boeing 727-100 from a 727-200 by the shape of the intake of its center engine (oval, not round). I could spend hours cloistered in my bedroom or at the dining room table, poring over the route maps and timetables of Pan Am, Aeroflot, Lufthansa, and British Airways, memorizing the names of the foreign capitals they flew to. Next time you're wedged in economy, flip to the route maps in the back of the inflight magazine. I could spend hours studying those three-panel foldouts and their crazy nests of city-pairs, immersed in a kind of junior pilot porno. I knew the logos and liveries of all the prominent airlines (and many of the nonprominent ones) and could replicate them freehand with a set of colored pencils.

Thus I learned geography as thoroughly as I learned aviation. For most pilots, the world beneath those lines of the route map remains a permanent abstraction, countries and cultures of little or no interest beyond the airport fence or the perimeter of the layover hotel. For others, as happened to me, there's a point when those places become meaningful. One feels an excitement not merely from the act of moving through the air, but from the idea of going somewhere. You're not just flying, you're traveling. The full, beautiful integration of flight and travel, travel and flight. Are they not the same thing? To me they are. One can inspire the other, sure, but I never would have traipsed off to so many countries in my free time—from Cambodia to Botswana, Sri Lanka to Brunei—if I hadn't fallen in love with aviation first.

If ever this connection struck me in a moment of clarity, it was a night several years ago during a vacation to Mali, in West Africa. Though I could write pages about the wonders and strangeness of West Africa, one of the trip's most vivid moments took place at the airport in Bamako, moments after our plane touched down from Paris. Two hundred of us descended the drive-up stairs into a sinister midnight murk. The air was misty and smelled of woodsmoke. Yellow beams from military-style spotlights crisscrossed the tarmac. We were paraded solemnly around the exterior of the aircraft, moving aft in a wide semicircle toward the arrivals lounge. There was something ceremonial and ritualistic about it. I remember walking beneath the soaring, blue-and-white tail of Air France, the plane's auxiliary turbine screaming into the darkness. It was all so exciting and, to use a politically incorrect word, exotic. And that incredible airplane is what brought us there. In a matter of hours, no less—a voyage that once would have taken weeks by ship and desert caravan.

The disconnect between air travel and culture seems to me wholly unnatural, yet we've seen a virtually clean break. Nobody gives a damn anymore how you get there—the means coldly separated from the ends. For most people, whether bound for Kansas or Kathmandu, the airplane is a necessary evil, incidental to the journey but no longer part of it. An old girlfriend of mine, an artist who would have no trouble appreciating the play of light in a seventeenth-century painting by Vermeer, found my opinions utterly perplexing. Like most people, she analogized airplanes merely as tools. The sky was the canvas, she believed; the jetliner as discardable as the painter's brush. I disagree, for as a brush's stroke represents the moment of artistic inspiration, what is travel without the journey?

We've come to view flying as yet another impressive but ultimately uninspiring technological realm. There I am, sitting in a Boeing 747, a plane that if tipped onto its nose would rise as tall as a 20-story office tower. I'm at 33,000 feet over the Pacific Ocean, traveling at 600 miles per hour, bound for the Far East. And what are the passengers doing? Complaining, sulking, tapping glumly into their laptops. A man next to me is upset over a dent in his can of ginger ale. This is the realization, perhaps, of a fully evolved technology. Progress, one way or the other, mandates that the extraordinary become the ordinary. But don't we lose valuable perspective when we begin to equate the commonplace, more or less by definition, with the tedious? Aren't we forfeiting something important when we sneer indifferently at the sight of an airplane—at the sheer impressiveness of being able to throw down a few hundred dollars and travel halfway around the world at nearly the speed of sound? It's a tough sell, I know, in this age of long lines, grinding delays, overbooked planes, and inconsolable babies. To be clear, I am not extolling the virtues of tiny seats or the culinary subtlety of half-ounce bags of snack mix. The indignities and hassles of modern air travel require little

elaboration and are duly noted. But believe it or not, there is still plenty about flying for the traveler to savor and appreciate.

I'm hesitant to say that we've developed a sense of entitlement, but it's something like that. Our technological triumphs aside, consider also the industry's remarkable safety record and the fact that fares have remained startlingly cheap, even with tremendous surges in the price of fuel. Sure, years ago, passengers could enjoy a five-course meal served by a tuxedoed flight attendant before retiring to a private sleeping berth. My first airplane ride was in 1974: I remember my father in a suit and tie and double helpings of fresh cheesecake on a ninety-minute domestic flight. The thing was, getting on a plane was expensive. This will be lost on many people today, young people especially, but once upon a time, college kids didn't zip home for a few days over Christmas. You didn't grab a last minute seat for \$99 and pop over to Las Vegas?or to Mallorca or Phuket?for a long weekend. Flying was a luxury, and people indulged sporadically, if at all. In 1939, aboard Pan Am's Dixie Clipper, it cost \$750 to fly round-trip between New York and France. That's equal to well over \$11,000 in today's money. In 1970, it cost the equivalent of \$2,700 to fly from New York to Hawaii.

Things changed. Planes, for one, became more efficient. Aircraft like the 707 and the 747 made long-haul travel affordable to the masses. Then the effects of deregulation kicked in, changing forever the way airlines competed. Fares plummeted, and passengers poured in. Yes, flying became more aggravating and less comfortable. It also became affordable for almost everybody.

I have learned never to underestimate the contempt people hold for airlines and the degree to which they hate to fly. While some of this contempt is well deserved, much of it is unfair. Today a passenger can, in a backpack and flip-flops, traverse the oceans for the equivalent of a few pennies per mile, in near-perfect safety and with an 85 percent chance of arriving on time. Is that really such an awful way to travel? Meanwhile, if you're that insatiably eager to revisit those luxurious indulgences of aviation's golden years, well, you can do that too, by purchasing a first or business class ticket?for less than what it cost fifty years ago.

Users Review

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