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Are You Making Travel Harder Than It Needs to Be?

While many of us travel for business or pleasure, travel can often times be something less than enjoyable, from banged knees and screaming babies on airplanes, to out-of-control air conditioning or heating on trains and subways. And don't get me started on layovers. Sometimes we just have to put up with what we're given, as is the case when snowstorms blanket the northeast and people get stranded for hours or days on end. But some of the time we can be better prepared for "unexpected" situations and be all the happier for it.

Sleeping on a Plane

The debate between whether the person who reclines their seat is more evil than the person who knees the seat in order to keep it from reclining continues unabated, and will either continue until the sun grows large and old and wipes out all remaining life on our planet, or until such point as the airline industry sees fit to give both the passenger in front and the passenger behind enough room to sit, eat, sleep and use a laptop. (Here's hoping that airlines start using Zodiac seats, which move forward as you lean your seat back, meaning the only knees you inconvenience are your own, and the rear passenger maintains their legroom). Given that you often don't know upon boarding whether or not you will be able to recline your seat, the ideal solution is to plan for what you're given.

"I have a whole airplane sleep kit I take with me," explains Nathan Brennek, a veteran business traveler. "Whether I lean my seat back or not, I get a neck cramp from leaning my head over to the side. So, I always bring one of those neck pillows that wraps around your neck and buttons in the front." His sleep kit also contains a set of earplugs, an eye mask, and two Excedrin PM.

"I can never sleep the night before a flight," admits Brennek. "I missed a flight early one Christmas eve morning back in college and it took me literally the whole day to criss-cross the country to get home that night. Now I can't sleep a wink if I have a morning flight." Brennek takes the sleeping pills right before boarding.

"By the time the flight takes off, I am fast asleep," Brennek boasts. "I wouldn't travel any other way."

Air Conditioning Too Cold? Heat Too Hot?

One of the worst parts of travel is the lack of control over heating and cooling. For Americans especially, who are accustomed to being in air conditioned environments 24 hours per day, the surprise of either the heat of the local climate (Charleston, South Carolina or Mumbai, India, for example), or cooling systems designed around non-human factors (such as the New York subway system) can be shocking indeed.

Many a tourist has gotten a winter cold on a New York train in August. Or lay gasping in a pool of sweat in a southeast Asian hotel.

The secret, known to legions of menopausal women around the world, is layering. When preparing your traveling outfit, put a light, summery bottom layer, followed by layers of warm, but lightweight clothing on top. The frigid air conditioning of a cross-country train's sleeper car set to sixty degrees will fade into a mere annoyance if you've packed the proper layers for this eventuality.

Many business-traveler-focused companies have clothing specifically geared for the regular traveler. A lot of this clothing is not only lightweight and good for layering, it is designed to stay wrinkle-free, which is an added bonus if you encounter the next traveling nightmare:

Talkative Neighbors and Children

While some of us see reaching our destination as the best part of travel, others find meeting people and having a good long chat with a stranger to be equally rewarding. There's nothing wrong with either of those approaches; there's no judgment here. The problem is when two people with opposing viewpoints on this issue are seated next to each other, and the "chatter" tries to involve the "chattee" in conversation. As many business travelers know, an iPod is a good deterrent for a seatmate who is overly talkative. Sometimes the headphones alone are a signal to the offending party that you are enjoying your private time.

If all else fails, and your seatmate doesn't seem to understand your signals, most people will respond well to a gentle reproach, such as "It's been great talking with you, but I have to hit the ground running when we land and I was really hoping to get a couple of hours sleep. Do you mind?" Or, "I've enjoyed our talk, but unfortunately I have to get three reports typed up before we land and I'm already a little behind. Do you mind?"

While adults respond to reason, babies and small children are another issue entirely. Hopefully, you have packed your earplugs, eyemask and pillow and have downed your sleeping pills before the flight. If that's the case, a crying baby shouldn't be much of a problem.

As for small children kicking the back of your seat, usually just peaking over your seat at the parent will cause the parent to be embarrassed enough to stop their child. If that doesn't work, and you have spoken to the flight attendant with no result... I'm sorry, I've got nothing. Kids are chaos personified. Just grin and bear it.

Unexpected Travel Delays

If you were planning on arriving fresh pressed and ready for your business meeting, that idea drifts into fantasy territory after a night sleeping on the floor of the airline terminal in your clothing during a snowstorm. If you've dressed in travel-friendly attire (see above), you can sleep on the floor all you like and you'll still appear professionally dressed when you arrive.

Fortunately, once e-readers were invented, the business traveler no longer had any excuse for boredom on an unexpected travel delay. If you don't have an e-reader, you really should get one. Not only are they great for reading all sorts of memos and work papers (did you know you can email a PDF to your Kindle? You can!), you truly never know when you might get stuck at a doctor's office with nothing but a dog-eared copy of People magazine and 45 minutes to kill.

Being prepared to either utilize your spare time to get work done, or at least keep yourself entertained, is a good part of not being driver crazy by a travel delay.

A bigger problem with an unexpected flight delay is that while we may have enough smart phone or laptop battery to last us until we get to the hotel, that power suddenly becomes a valuable commodity when you're in an airport for hours, calling travel agents, reorganizing your schedule and sending emails. Two things I like to bring are my computer and phone chargers, and my secret weapon: the multi-electrical adapter. These inexpensive little devices can be found at your local hardware store for under five dollars, and convert a single outlet into two or three. The problem is that in an older airport, and

especially when the entire flight or multiple flights of business professionals are stranded there together, all of the electrical outlets may already be in use once you need one. While many airports have pop-up electrical outlet stands where you can charge your battery, most of us want to sit down near an outlet so we can use our computers, and those are often all in use. What to do then? If you have an adapter, then you can ask politely if they will share the outlet – most people will be happy too, since you've brought enough for everyone. I take this little gadget with me everywhere I go, even when I'm not traveling – it's great for making friends at Starbucks.

Unfortunately, stress is harder to combat than boredom. The uncertainty of meeting your obligations at your destination, combined with the lack of control presented in a forced layover, can be more than many travelers can handle. The ones who seem to do the best are the ones who have (a) emotionally prepared themselves for the possibility of a delay, and (b) physically prepared themselves with electrical adapters, pillows, clothing, etc.

In other words, all the above preparations will bring down your stress level in the event of unexpected delays. The more you can be prepared, the less stress you will have.

If you find yourself unprepared for a delay, many successful businesspeople recommend that you adopt a Zen-like attitude towards the situation. Are you in a situation to (a) make the snow stop falling, (b) fix the plane, (c) pilot the plane in case of an absent or delayed pilot from another flight? No? Then mentally adopting an accepting frame of mind and choosing to enjoy the situation can do wonders for your mental health and your ability to become productive once you finally reach your destination. Pick up a book or magazine from an airport vendor, grab a coffee and a snack, and settle in.

Flying Doesn't Have to Be Stressful

As you can see, being prepared ahead of time is ninety percent of having a pleasant travelling experience. With a kit of travel supplies, you can live on the road as easily as you can at home, that is, even if your home has uncontrollable air conditioning, uncomfortable seats, and kicking toddlers. As the number of people flying goes up every year, and airplane seats get smaller, taking responsibility for your own comfort is the best way of making sure that you're in the best shape you can be at the end of the flight.

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