

SECRETS OF AN AIRLINE PILOT

News / Airlines



Ever wondered how you can be stranded somewhere due to weather when that somewhere has perfectly blue skies? Ever thought about how often turbulence causes crashes? Ever wanted to take a look at the cockpit but figured you'd somehow wind up on a no-fly list? Well, now you can learn the answers to your curiosities straight from the source. Last week, a user on Reddit posed the question "People who work for airlines, what are secrets passengers don't know?" Lots of people sent in answers, but none were as useful as user PM_ME_YOUR_EMPENNAGE who claims to be a pilot who works for a major US airline. This info-sharer put together a rather interesting FAQ of sorts and I'm reposting it here (although I've altered the NSFW parts to make it a little more family-friendly). Enjoy:

Airline pilot (in the US) here.

Every time this question pops up it's the same answer: there aren't that many "dark secrets".

That being said, I'll share some little known facts and protips, since the amount of ignorance surrounding how people think the aviation industry works is appalling. I'm gonna copy paste a response to these types of threads I frequently repost:

When you buy that plane ticket, you are automatically agreeing to the contract of carriage between you and the airline. It's a large document that easily found on every airlines website. And if passengers could be bothered to actually read it, it would save them and us so much trouble and awkwardness. So, don't [complain] about something clearly stated in that contract (like not getting

a hotel in weather cancellations)

Speaking of cancellations, usually the only time you get a hotel (per the contracts) is if it is blatantly the airlines fault. You will almost never get put in a hotel due to cancellations due to weather. That's beyond the airline's control. ALWAYS PLAN YOUR TRIPS AROUND THE WEATHER IF YOU CAN ESPECIALLY IN THE WINTER

Speaking of weather, don't get pissy if we're delayed even though the weather at your departure and destination airports is perfectly fine. Your flight could very well be traversing thousands of miles and, newsflash: lots of [bad] weather could be happening in between. Every so often you get massive systems that can split almost the entire country in half. Navigating around those can be tricky. and could require us to take a much longer route potentially requiring a very annoying fuel stop. It's pretty insulting when this is the case and passengers come up to us demanding we leave since the weather is "fine". If ya'll want to fly through a supercell thunderstorm that's spitting out hail and tornadoes, by all means, go steal the plane and do it yourself, see how that works out.

Speaking of fuel, and since this seems to be not so obvious to many, planes are not cars. You can NOT fill up a plane with full fuel AND passengers/baggage for every flight. For one, the airplane structure would collapse (ELI5ed). Second, it's simply not operationally necessary. There's a legally required minimum amount of fuel for all flights and all airlines have to follow this minimum, and more often than not they're fueled a little more than that. The problem is (especially with smaller regional jets) where the minimum fuel required (we fuel by weight not volume) starts to impinge on the passenger/baggage weight allowance. Which means we may need to leave passengers/bags behind, which leads me to my next point:

That same contract of carriage says we're under no obligation to take you or your luggage anywhere if operational circumstances dictate so (ie wight and balance issues). I've had to kick out passengers and their luggage, or just their luggage, multiple times due to weight limitations, it sucks, it's awkward, but I can't bend the laws of physics to make my plane take off with your sorry fat ass and bag full of dildos in the back.

We, as pilots, can not put you in hotels, assign you a seat, nor do we know what time or gate your flight to [Somewhere] Tennessee leaves, etc etc. When you see us walking around the terminal, leave us alone. We're busy running to our next flight or having lunch or whatever. Our job is to take you safely from point A to B. Period. Not to give you lessons on self sufficiency and how to navigate airports (READ THE SIGNS PEOPLE). Yes, most of us will gladly answer basic questions, but don't get pissy when we tell you we're not familiar with the airport. Just because we wear a cheesy uniform doesn't mean we know every single airport like the back of our hands.

No, planes don't fly themselves any more than a car with adaptive cruise control (or the Tesla for that matter) drives itself.

It's the nightmarish flights, the ones where we're running very late, there's stuff broken in the plane, we're coming up on our legal duty limits AND there's [bad] weather everywhere where we work the hardest, and they're the ones where passengers are the pissiest and least ungrateful. Keep that in mind next time you fly on a nightmarish flight. This isn't an easy job and it's rather insulting many people think of us as little more than glorified bus drivers. Hell, we hardly ever get thanked even in perfectly ok flights.

Turbulence CAN NOT bring down a plane. Period. It is thought to have only ever possibly perhaps maybe happened ONCE in the whole history of aviation. I bet many on here will claim that I'm full of shit, that they've experienced "severe" turbulence. No, you haven't. I've had hundreds of

passengers jump out of my plane bitching about how it was “the worse flight ever and so horribly bumpy”, as if it was our fault. 99% of the time, those bumps they felt are what we call, and what is defined by the FAA as “light chop”. Big deal, it’s little more than a nuisance. Moderate chop will be what most people complain about but it’s still not even enough to spill a drink. Legitimate severe turbulence WILL toss you around violently enough to slam your ugly face against the seat in front of you, against the ceiling if your seatbelt is off (WHICH IS WHY YOU NEVER EVER TAKE IT OFF UNTIL WE ARE PARKED AT THE GATE AND THE SIGN IS OFF) and snap your neck and die (yes, it has happened), open up the bins and spill bags everywhere, potentially cracking your skull if a hard suitcase hits you. In other words, the stuff you see in hollywood. Extreme turbulence will actually bend a plane, and that is extremely rare, maybe one or two occurrences a year in the US.

Free travel benefits are overrated, they’re not always completely free. I rarely have the time or money to go anywhere (for now anyways). And the planes are always full (they’re standby tickets).

Many of us get paid the same as fast food workers when starting out, and some live in slum-like conditions. Bear in mind we’ll be responsible for tens of thousands of more lives in a year than most doctors, policemen, firefighter ever will be in their careers. And our career is one of the most expensive to train for out there, up there with the medical field.

We have every federal legal right to kick you out of the plane for whatever reason. Been there, done that.

Oversales suck. We know. But they’re a necessary evil. I’ve had a few flights show as oversold, and then we leave with the plane half empty. People misconnect, people sleep through their alarm clocks, [stuff] happens and they don’t show up. Airlines will typically overbook about 5% of available seats to cover their no shows. Flying empty airplanes is expensive. So that’s how they cover their asses to mitigate profit loss. Otherwise, we’d still be an era like back in the 70s where a round trip ticket in coach between Chicago and Milwaukee cost \$2000 bucks.

The terms “pilot and copilot” are extremely misunderstood and matter of fact rarely ever used in the industry. First off, the “copilot” (more accurately First Officer) as many people believe otherwise, is every bit as capable and experienced (in some cases maybe more) than the “pilot” (ie Captain). He’s not (usually) the blithering idiot as shown in that one Denzel Washington movie. He has essentially the same authority as the captain, and they work as a team. News outlets love to say “the pilot did this, the pilot did that” and they always forget there’s a TEAM in the cockpit, the pilotS. It’s not a case of one guy more work than the other. We take turns flying. One guy flies out, one guy flies back or some other agreement.

No we don’t have any “tricks or secrets” on how to get the best tickets prices, quit asking. Matter of fact, due to our flight benefits, many of us haven’t even had to check prices for years. Furthermore, at my employer, one of the worlds largest airlines, out of the 100k employees, it is said less than a dozen have access to and know the ticket pricing system intimately. It’s one of an airlines most deeply guarded secrets, more so than the Coke or KFC recipes.

Yes, you CAN visit the cockpit ON THE GROUND, there’s no law (in the US at least) saying you can’t. That’s up to our discretion. Just ask us. (preferably AFTER we land, if it looks like we’re not packing our stuff to get off the plane) I’ve never turned down anybody that asked and many of us gladly will show people around, it really is nice to connect with passengers interested in our profession for once. If the cockpit door is locked for whatever reason (probably because it’s hot/cold as hell outside), just tell a flight attendant to ask us.

That's all I got for now. I'll add more if I think of them.

No, I don't hate my job, I rather be castrated than work another 9 to 5 gig ever again. But I just wish the flying public wasn't so oblivious and was more appreciative to what we do.

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