

# Plane truth about travel

**F**lying down to Lima is not as easy as it sounds. Start point, Miami, where the city council is chopping down foliage along Route 95 to the airport. Why defoliate Miami's highway system?

Muggers and Mau Maus, it seems, have been lurking in the bushes. They jump out, break car windshields with bricks and then proceed to rob, beat and often murder their hapless victims. Just getting to Miami airport is a challenge.

On to Air Panama. "Sorry, no more seats, try tomorrow." But I had confirmed reservations! Shrugs. One does not expect this in Miami. But Miami has become more Latino than North American.

Off to the phone. "This is El Senor Margolis whose next call will be to the head of the Federal Aviation Administration in Washington." Moments later: "Ah, senor, there has been an error. We have found a place for you."

What happened, apparently, was that Air Panama originally had a larger plane but it got repossessed by the finance company. There was just not enough room for everyone in the smaller plane that the airline somewhere dug up — probably a used car lot.

After all this work, an hour's delay, then questions of why fight to get on Air Panama? Its plane, of frightening antiquity, looked like it had AIDS. Interiors were peeling; seat belts didn't seem to be attached to anything; tray tables fell into your lap. A deep religious feeling swept over me. Only generous portions of scotch dispensed by the pleasant cabin staff kept me airborne.

Panama, a delightful little place, hot, steamy, squalid, but with gorgeous girls, known, feminists please note, as *chiquitas*. They smile, they flirt, they have wonderful long legs and believe in

## Punch



"It's only an airport security precaution, love. You can be sheriff again when you reach your destination."

**ERIC  
MARGOLIS**



friendliness. And the food: A BIG TASTE, seven on my gastronomic scale of 10. But even better is La Careta in Miami, where one can commit hara-kiri on black beans and rice, crispy pork in garlic and deep-fried bananas.

Downward to Bogota on Aerolineas Argentinas that makes Air Panama look like Swissair. Except that on arriving at Bogota airport — a dingy, creepy place filled with pistol-packing goons in ill-fitting brown suits and slicked-back hair — a box inside the hold blocks the aircraft cargo hatch. Three hours delay.

So I almost missed the next flight, Aero-peru — and, on boarding, I wished that I had. Another antediluvian plane, the earliest model 727, long ago written off by some gringo airline, creaking and groaning in the turbulent night air over the Andes. Each time we hit an air pocket all the passengers cried out, "Aiya!" — a sort of "ole" for air travellers, except we were the bull.

Lima airport. Don't take cabs, I was advised, because travellers are driven to remote locales and murdered. How cheery. The next day back to the airport and off to Cuzco, 11,000 feet up in the Andes. Another Aero-peru flight, equally hoary, just scraping over the snow-capped Andean peaks. A landing that seemed sheer suicide, like trying to land a 747 on Wall Street.

Then to Machu Picchu, one of the world's true wonders, six hours of magnificent train ride through wild mountains and gorges. Then back to Cuzco airport. I had to get back to Lima for a meeting with Peru's president.

"Your name not on our list. You try tomorrow." But I reconfirmed! "No planes anyway." It was horribly true. Low clouds made the Aero-peru planes go back to Lima. Hordes of irate, stranded tourists. Then I see a travel agent I had met. "Please, amigo, make a miracle happen." Inca magic is worked in the form of Yankee dollars; nobody in Peru wants Canadian money. The miracle occurs, a boarding pass on a fully booked Faucett airline flight. I elbow my way onto the flight, terrified that someone else also had my seat. Nerves shattered, heart pounding, I strap myself in, ready to fight to the death for seat 22-C. Somehow, I get to Lima.

Homeward bound, having survived taxis to the airport. The big CP airliner looked, well, like the Promised Land. Departure at the convenient hour of 1 a.m. Sit four hours in an unheated, windy lounge (it's winter in South America) and then ... the great escape. Delay. CP, becoming suddenly Latin, overbooked another of its flights so we had to wait and take their refugees. We are packed into the cabin, every seat filled with human flotsam. Nine hours later, Toronto appears below us, flat, tame, boring — and wonderful.