

Sky high: The airlines

Some years ago I found myself delayed, as usual, at Jeddah Airport in Saudi Arabia. I fell to chatting with a fellow voyager about the airline of a neighboring country.

He regaled me with intimate details of mechanical problems aboard the aircraft of that country's national airline.

"Never fly them," he warned me. I asked him how he knew so much about the iffy airline. "I'm the director," he replied, "and I never, ever fly them." Which just goes to show that you have to pick your airlines with the same care you would choose a wife, doctor or wine.

As a frequent flyer, I thought I'd share some of my own painfully acquired preferences, particularly now that it's summer travel time.

Most Exciting Flight Ever: On Air France's glorious, sexy, supersonic Concorde. Getting rocketed up to Mach 2 by those big Rolls-Royce engines is a thrill of a lifetime, rather like spending *une nuit d'amour* with Catherine Deneuve.

Best European Airlines: For ambience, superb food, lovely cabin crew and general feeling of well-being, Air France is Numero Un. Plus the added benefit of getting off the plane in France, my favorite country in the world to visit.

Next, Swissair and Lufthansa. Here you get impeccable Teutonic efficiency, spit-and-polish maintenance, punctuality and fine food. And a welcome feeling of safety.

They and Air France are the airlines of choice for going into the perilous parts of the Third World—and even more welcome as the means of escape.

Best Asian Airlines: Hong Kong's Cathay Pacific that combines North European technical efficiency

ERIC MARGOLIS



with Chinese entrepreneurial gusto. Rivalled by Singapore Airlines, whose nifty hostesses remind the weary traveller that women can still be charming and feminine while doing their jobs. Both of these Asian lines are noted for their punctuality, service and decent seating space.

Best African Airline: South African Airways, just about the only safe, well-run, well-maintained airline on the continent. Fly other Brand X carriers, and you sweat bullets wondering if hatch doors were properly closed or hydraulic leaks plugged.

Best South American Airline: Brazil's Varig, though watch its sardine-seating in economy. Chile's Lan Chile is not bad and Argentina's carrier has a certain Italian panache.

Other airlines in rough-and-tumble Latin America range from suicidal to chancy. Two years ago I was even booked on an Air Panama flight that was cancelled when the aircraft was repossessed by the finance company.

As for Mexico, good luck flying, amigos.

U.S.: What a mess! What torture, as just about everyone complains. Deregulation has brought chaos and social Darwinism as airlines fight each other like voracious insects on the floor of a tropical rain forest. Woe to him who flies.

Best of a bad lot, American Airlines. People who plan to take Eastern, Northwest or Continental would do better to walk, or bus it. Flying in the U.S., to paraphrase Ben Jonson, has all the joys of being in prison plus the chance to crash or collide in midair.

Most Secure Airline: Israel's bullet-proof El-Al, whose security is legendary and pilots all aces. The combat rations and don't-bother-me-I'm-busy service, however, has led passengers to claim that the flight crews and kitchens are anti-Semitic.

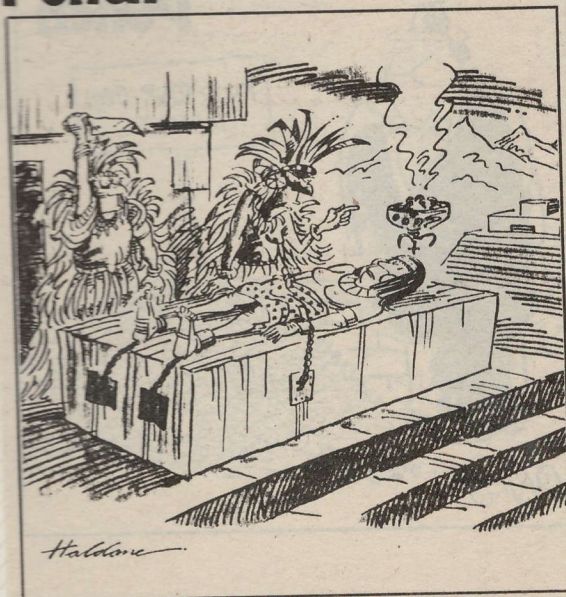
East Europe: The world's largest airline, the USSR's Aeroflot is known in the trade as 'Aeorplot' because of its frequent smash-ups.

Service is sort of your prison camp basic and lots of Aeroflot flights go in and out under weather conditions that would ground western carriers. Ditto for Poland's death-defying LOT and Yugoslavia's pack-em-in JAT.

Romania's TAROM is high up on the list of the world's most accident-prone, a distinction strongly contested by hot-rodding THY, Turkey's answer to the cruise missile.

Mideast: Aside from El-Al, I guess the next best are Jordan's ALIA, Gulfair and Pakistan's PIA. Otherwise, in the region from Casablanca to Bangkok, it's best to avoid most national airlines, unless no choice is available. Even then, yak, ox-cart or dromedary should be considered. And, believe me, after some death-defying weeks in the torrid, amoebic depths of the Third World, there's nothing finer than boarding a cool, clean French airliner and hearing, "Du champagne, monsieur?"

Punch



"Quite frankly, I don't think the sun god gives a damn about your sociology degree."