

Up in the Air

A Traveler's Tale in Four Parts

By Debra VanDeventer

Flight Attendant

Am I too old to be a flight attendant? That's what I've been wondering lately. One advantage of retirement is that you have time to travel. There are many places I want to go, but airfare is expensive, so I've been thinking I could become a flight attendant. You get free flights plus a salary and an interesting wardrobe if you like short skirts and jackets with a matching scarf. The snappy ensemble comes with a choice of sensible black pumps or boots with dark tights. The lapel pins are cute.

I've been observing flight attendants, formerly known as stewardesses, for some time now. After my last flight, I looked up the requirements for employment. The stringent height, weight, and age guidelines of the past have loosened up, although you have to fit down the narrow aisle and be able to stuff heavy carry-on bags into the overhead storage compartments. There are personal grooming standards for men and women. The airlines don't allow flight attendants to have visible tattoos, extreme piercings, or wild hair colors. I would be OK in this area unless they count gray as a wild color.

My hairdresser says that gray hair is in vogue. Some of her young clients are dying their hair to achieve this color. It's a time-consuming and expensive process to strip the hair of its color and add in the silver tones. One perk of coming of age is that I don't have to go to all that trouble.

I've seen attendants who are, shall I say, older. After watching them do their job, I know I could do it. A strategically placed neck scarf and expertly applied make-up can work wonders and I've been pumping iron at the local ladies gym. Plus, I have experience. Having been a kindergarten teacher for many years, I'm adept at handing out snacks and an expert in bossing people around nicely.

On one of our recent flights, my husband, Ed remarked, "I'll bet that flight attendant used to be a teacher."

"How can you tell?"

"Listen to her. She has that elementary teacher voice."

The attendant in question was making her way down the aisle.

“Sir, I’ve asked you twice to turn off your computer and stow it under your seat. I need you to do that *now*.” she said to the man two rows ahead of us. Her face was smiling but her voice meant business. She looked him in the eye and didn’t move until he had complied. I’m sure he didn’t want to sit in time out; that seat in the back of the plane by the bathroom.

On second thought, maybe I don’t want to be a flight attendant. It's too much like the career I just retired from.

Dangerous Snow Globes

As a flight attendant I wouldn’t need to go through the TSA security lines. I must admit, however, that I’m getting good at dressing for success in this area. My standard travel outfit consists of black, elastic-waist pants, slip-on shoes, a tee shirt, and a black cardigan sweater. I waltz up to the space-age-scanning tube in record time, put my hands over my head, and stand with confidence. With all systems go, I pick up my bag, slip on my shoes and am off.

Ed hates this process and grumbles. He takes off his shoes and removes his belt. Then he empties his pockets of keys, loose change, wallet, and cell phone. Finally he takes off his clunky watch and removes his hat and jacket. If he’s lucky, he gets through the scanner on the first try, but more often than not, there’s a leftover coin or some other object in his pocket that causes concern. Once cleared, he shuffles along in his stockinged feet, holding up his pants and clutching his shoes, watch, and wallet. I glance back at him with a sense of superiority.

I wasn’t so haughty when we were returning from a trip to England. As we printed off our boarding passes at Heathrow, I saw that I had an unusual code stamped at the bottom.

“Hey, what does SSSS mean?” I asked Ed. “It’s on my boarding pass.”

“I’m not sure. It's not on mine,” he answered.

It would soon be apparent that quadruple S is not advantageous. While we were in line, an official-looking woman with a clipboard approached us. She asked to see our passports and boarding passes.

“Where are you headed?” she asked innocently enough.

“We are going back home... Arizona... USA...” answered Ed.

“How long have you been in England?”

“Twenty-three days,” Ed responded confidently.

“What were you doing in London?”

“We were sightseeing, the usual places, Buckingham Palace, The Tate Gallery, The Tower of London, things like that.”

“What day were you at the Tower of London?” This time she directed her question at me and her voice took on a serious tone.

“I...I... I don’t know,” I stammered. “It was during that first week. I think it was a Saturday... maybe September 15?”

“Where did you stay while you were in London?”

“We rented an apartment in Drayton Park.”

“The two of you?”

“Well, no, our friends stayed with us, but they took an earlier flight out, back to the US... America.” Now I was getting nervous.

After a few more questions, the clipboard lady seemed satisfied and moved to ask similar questions of others in line.

“That was intense,” I griped.

“It must be part of their security,” Ed tried to reassure me. “This is a busy airport.”

I supposed he was right, but as I came to the first security checkpoint, the agent took an unusually long time to go over my boarding pass and passport.

“Ma’am, step over here” the agent instructed.

“But, but... my husband is going that way...” I began.

“Ma’am, step over here,” he ordered.

I glanced over my shoulder and signaled to Ed that I was heading to a different line. I wasn’t worried. Having taken extra care that morning to make sure all liquids in my carry-on were under the three ounce limit and in clear plastic, I placed my bag on the conveyor belt and strode through the scanner. I passed through, but my bag didn’t.

“Is this your bag?” a blue gloved woman scowled.

“Yes. Is there a problem?” I asked.

“Step over here.”

Oh, not again, I thought. By now Ed was out of sight, having breezed through on the fast track for once.

The woman rummaged through my bag. *Ha!* I said to myself as she pulled out my compliant toiletries. *Nothing to hide here.* Just then, she yanked her latex fingers out of my carry-on.

“What’s this?” she hissed as she pointed to three small boxes wrapped in tissue at the bottom of my bag.

“Those are snow globes. My granddaughters collect them. These have London scenes and when you shake them it snows on the London Bridge... souvenirs,” I nervously blabbered.

The woman stared at the boxes as if they were kryptonite.

“Unwrap them.”

“But I wrapped them in their boxes so they wouldn't break.”

“Ma'am, you need to unwrap them.”

I did as I was told, suddenly afraid of the authority the attendant exuded. She scanned and swabbed the snow globes before she allowed me to stuff them back in my bag. Then *I* got the snow globe treatment. I had to take off my shoes and socks and she swabbed the palms of my hands and the bottoms of my feet. They patted me down before I was released.

I straggled to the lounge area, my shoes and socks in one hand and my disheveled bag in the other. When I caught up with Ed, I told him the whole sad story. He thought it was funny. The tables had turned in a big way. Now we're even and I'm not so smug when we go through security.

SSSS stands for Secondary Security Screening Selection. I looked it up. It's usually a random selection, unless they catch you with dangerous snow globes in your carry-on. Now I'm marked for life.

The Silent Treatment

Another issue for me is that once I'm on board, I don't want to start a conversation with a random passenger knowing that there will be no escape for the next several hours. I initiate a no-talking policy. I learned this lesson the hard way on a trip to Atlanta.

“Where ya headed honey?” the lady next to me asked as she attempted to stuff her oversized, gold handbag under the seat in front of her.

“I'm going to a conference in Atlanta. After that, I'll visit my son and his family in Marietta.” I began.

“Girrrllll... I tell you, they're ALL about the glitz in Atlanta!”

Was she justifying her purse, or warning me that my sensible black travel outfit would stand out, in a bad way, once we landed? We introduced ourselves. Her name was Jackie, and she was heading home to Georgia.

“You got any grandkids?” Jackie continued

“Three girls,” I said, “Two in Indiana, and one in Atlanta.”

“I'll tell you what, I don't want no grandkids until I'm about sixty. By that time I figure I'll have one foot in the grave and I won't have to be taking care of no kids.”

I'd passed my sixtieth birthday, I didn't feel I had one foot in the grave, and I liked my grandkids. But I was trapped in my seat. For the next three hours Jackie rambled on.

“Honey, let me tell you about this bra shop outside of Atlanta. You ever hear of the Double D-vas? They have a show on TV about women looking for the perfect fit. Most of ‘em are big chested women, and they have been wearing the wrong size bra their whole life. These bra ladies are so good, they don’t even have to measure you. They just look at your boobs, and they can tell which bra to fit you in. Girl, the right bra can change your life.”

By the time our flight ended, I knew more about Jackie than I did about my sister. Including her bra size. Nowadays, I make my way to my seat and settle in with a book, answering questions with terse replies and avoiding eye contact until we’ve landed. It’s safer that way.

Moving On

When we moved to Arizona, airline travel became a necessary part of my life as I tried to keep connected to my family and friends. Some thought we were foolish to make such a drastic move across the country.

It wasn’t a hasty decision. We’d been through Tucson on a vacation and were intrigued enough to spend two summers in a rental house there. We fell in love with the turquoise sky, the saguaro cactus, the sunshine, and the way you could see a million stars in the clear night sky. Even the scorching summer temperatures didn’t scare us. During one of our summer stays we contacted a realtor and looked at houses. When we returned to Indiana, we talked about what it would be like to live in the southwest. “What if...” was a game we liked to play. I remember the night we decided.

“What if we moved to Tucson?” Ed said at dinner. “The housing market is incredible out there now.”

It wasn’t the first time he’d started this conversation.

“But our family needs us.” I echoed the sentiments of friends and family and rattled off all the reasons we should stay rooted.

“Deb, if we wait until no one needs us we’ll be the ones needing help. We’ve lived in the same community our entire lives. Our careers are winding down and our children are on their own. This is our chance to try something new.”

I looked at him across the table. His words made sense. I was terrified of moving, leaving friends and family and the home we had lived in for the past twenty-five years. I was more afraid of staying put, playing it safe, and clinging to the past. I took a gulp of wine. Then another.

“Let’s do it!”

We sold our home in Indiana and contacted our realtor in Tucson. She lined up some showings, and we purchased a home in Oro Valley during our two week fall break from school. Things fell into place nicely. With one exception.

My mother lived in an independent living apartment in Bloomington, Indiana. I went over weekly to get groceries, take her to appointments, and help organize a week's worth of her medications into the plastic pill box. It was becoming apparent that she would soon need to move to assisted living. When I announced that Ed and I were thinking of retiring to Arizona, my siblings agreed that it would make sense to move Mom to the Chicago area where she would be closer to three of her children. This freed me up to make my move across the country. Still, I was struggling with the decision and my responsibility to my mother. I would miss her.

Shortly after we moved, I took Mom to visit our new home in Arizona. She had always loved to travel and was excited to be going on an adventure. Mom sat by the window so she could see out, and I sat beside her in the middle seat. After Mom settled in, I tried to read. The words blurred before my eyes. This move was more unsettling than I thought it would be.

I glanced out the window at the clouds below. As we flew from one side of the country to the other, I felt like a balloon floating untethered between two worlds; the home I had left in Indiana and my new life in Arizona. I longed for someone to grab the string and pull me back to earth, grounding me to one spot. Who would pull the string, and where would I land? Where did I *want* to land?

Deep in thought, I retreated into my silent mode. I looked over at Mom as she slept. I knew that she had adjusted to her new home in Chicago and was close to family members there, but I felt like I had abandoned her. And yet, Mom's the one who always encouraged me to go for it, take a chance, live life to the fullest and add in a touch of glitz. That's how she had lived her life. I would need time to sort out my feelings.

The three-and-a-half hour flight from Indianapolis to Phoenix went smoothly, and we arrived without incident. As we waited to collect our bags, I asked Mom how she liked the flight.

"Well, the flight was fine," she said. "But that woman beside me was so rude. She never said a word to me the whole time."

"Mom... that woman was me. I was the one sitting next to you."

"Oh..."

We looked at each other and burst out laughing. Throughout the rest of Mom's stay we joked about "that rude woman" on the plane and wondered where she was now.

You may encounter that rude woman on her way to visit her mother in Chicago or her grandchildren in Indiana and Georgia. Or she may be off on an overseas

adventure. She's the one in black hiding behind her book. Don't sit by her if you are looking for a conversationalist.

And for the record, underneath her sensible tee shirt she may be wearing a cheetah-print, perfectly fitted bra from the Double D-vas Shop in Atlanta. There's a glitzy rhinestone charm dangling from its center. That quiet woman is secretly hoping to set off some alarms the next time she goes through security.