

“Don’t **MAKE** Me Turn This Thing Around!”

or, A Guide on How To Treat Your Pilot

BY SABRINA WOODS



Summer is here, and for a lot of people that means it is time to pack up the family-hauler and take off for sights unknown and grand adventures. Parents, kids, pets, and stuff — packed up, buckled in, and strapped down. Everyone exuberant and ready to go.

That is — until the weather changes, and the previously plotted course has to change as well. Then your spouse expresses displeasure that you won’t make the Big Event in time. Junior declares he’s hungry. Youngest child touches middle child’s things, causing the latter child to shriek. That suitcase you were pretty sure was strapped down comes loose and starts sliding around. And then Rover begins to show adamant signs that he has to relieve himself.

“Don’t make me turn this thing around!” my father would bellow after my sister and I pushed him particularly close to the breaking point on a few of those long cross-country trips of my childhood. I am sure some of you can relate — either as beleaguered parents, or as fellow past misbehavers. And while my dad was

perfectly capable of making good on the threat (and did at least twice), the act isn’t so easy when you are cruising along at 8,000 feet in your Cessna *Skywagon*. Worse, distracting the pilot has proven to be a very risky endeavor, and is routinely found on the FAA’s top ten human factors errors list.

So, fellow passengers, this article is for you. Consider this your guide on how to treat your pilot and help ensure your trip is a safe and happy one.

Gettin’ Ready

In preparation for your flight, the pilot is going to be very busy engaging in various preflight activities such as checking the weather, filing a flight plan, calculating how much fuel you are going to need, and determining the weight that you are bringing on board. This last part includes fuel, people and pets, and all your luggage. The emphasis on weight can seem a bit much, but in fact it is a very important part of ensuring the airworthiness of the aircraft. (check out Susan Parson’s

article, “You Can’t Take All That!” in this edition of *FAA Safety Briefing*.) Once all of the preflight planning is done, the pilot should take a walk around the aircraft and accomplish one last check of the fluids.

While the pilot is doing all of that, you can use this time to ensure what you intend to bring on board is truly necessary for your travels. Sometimes there is an urge to pack everything-but-the-kitchen-sink when traveling but, as noted, an aircraft can only handle so much weight. So a bit of prudence must be exercised. Clothing, favorite toys, a few snacks and water, destination-specific items (i.e., a fishing reel), and Rover’s food bowl are all great examples of what to bring. A full set of snow gear for your trip to the Grand Canyon in July — you know, in case it gets cold — is probably not such a great idea. Smaller, soft-sided (squishable) bags work best for packing, and liquid medicines and toiletry items should go into sealable waterproof bags in case the contents spill during flight.

Once you have determined what to bring, a good idea is to isolate the (few) items that you will want readily accessible during the flight. These include snacks, border crossing documents, and the handheld gaming system that will keep Junior occupied for hours. Everything else must be properly strapped down so as not to move and become a hazard in flight. This includes Rover. No matter how humorous it may seem to have a pet riding “shotgun,” the truth of the matter is that it can become an unpredictable distraction. Therefore, it is best to leave larger pets tethered towards the rear of the cabin, and smaller pets in strapped down travel crates for the duration of the flight.

Adults and older children should have a general understanding of how to operate their own restraining devices. In fact, it is a requirement for the pilot to ensure that passengers get this information. That way you can buckle up and extract yourself quickly should the situation warrant it, and help to take some more pressure off

the pilot so he or she can focus on other things.

Clothing should be appropriate for the climate in which you are flying, so think lightweight, breathable clothes

for temperate weather, and warmer, thermal wear for mountain flying. It is *always* a good idea to wear closed-toe, rubber soled shoes when flying because you just never know when you might need to get away from the aircraft as fast as possible. The last thing you want is a flip-flop coming off at a bad time.

My dad’s #1 rule when we traveled was that we weren’t going to stop unless we absolutely had to. *Period.* That included bathroom breaks. What does that have to do with flying? A great deal, because for the most part, private aircraft don’t have “facilities.” And while realistically my dad *could* have pulled over

and stopped if the situation was dire enough, it is incredibly difficult or impossible to do when flying to your destination. So consider this as a very polite way of telling you to make sure you “go” before you go and limit liquid intake in the hours preceding the trip. That goes double for Rover. Your pilot (and bladder) will thank you for it.

Exits are Here ... and Here

Take time to review the emergency procedures particular to your aircraft before you go. Although it is far easier to discern where aircraft exits are on a Cessna than on a Boeing 777, you need to make sure you know how to operate the doors and which way to egress depending on the situation. It is an excellent idea to make a “get out of Dodge” plan involving all family members should the worst occur and you get into an accident. Some things to identify are: who grabs the emergency kit, who tries to fire-fight, who takes baby/Rover/non-ambulatory person, etc. Running through drills prior to your first flight can help cement procedures in your mind so that it is automatic should the need arise.

It is also beneficial if all adults and age-appropriate children have a general working knowledge of how to work the radio, the GPS, and the emergency locator transmitter as a backup in case the pilot is occupied or unable to do so.

Cone of Silence

Once you are all strapped in and ready to go, the pilot will do a series of final checks in the cockpit before heading out to the runway. At this time, it is very important to invoke the “cone of silence,” to use a phrase from the popular 1960s television show, *Get Smart*. But instead of Agent 86 and the Chief, the important information that is being passed back and forth is between air traffic control and the pilot. While they discuss information critical to the flight the passengers need to be quiet to ensure that nothing is missed during the transmission. This means you will need to silence any electronic devices or noise-making toys, too.

There may be several other times during the flight where silence is required, such as when the pilot receives updated data pertinent to the flight path, when there is other air traffic in the area, and when entering the landing sequence. This isn’t an excuse to totally check out, however! Passengers can be a great asset to the pilot in helping to look out for nearby obstacles or aircraft. As the old adage goes: two sets of eyes are better than one. If you aren’t already familiar



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with “o’clock” directional positioning you might want to ask your pilot to teach you. You never know when you will have to tell your pilot to “check six!”

Excitement Management 101

Once airborne, the real adventure begins. Here is where you can probably do the most to endear yourself to the pilot and establish your position in the “greatest passenger ever” hall of fame.

You may not realize it because “s/he goes flying all the time,” but your pilot is under a lot of pressure and I don’t just mean the actual act of manipulating the aircraft. The FAA, the National Transportation and Safety Board, the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association, and many other aviation-related industries have all recognized, and advocated for sound aeronautical decision-making (ADM). ADM is the systematic approach to the mental process used by pilots to consistently determine the best course of action in response to a given set of circumstances. One of the biggest factors that can affect good ADM is something called “external pressure.”

By nature, the pilot just wants to please and in particular when the passengers are loved ones. He or she can feel the pressure to get to the destination early, to ensure the flight is as smooth and “fun” as possible, or to continue a course of action despite mounting information indicating that it might not be the best choice. If you aren’t careful, you can become a walking, talking physical embodiment of external pressure — a passenger who unknowingly and unwittingly places undue stress on the pilot.

To combat this, everyone on board needs to exercise a little “excitement management” and establish realistic expectations. Just like when driving, things might go wrong. The plane could malfunction, the weather might turn sour, or the destination airport might suddenly be inaccessible. So instead of expressing disappointment over changes to your plans, encourage the pilot to adhere

to personal minimums and become an active voice of reason. It will go a long way in keeping everyone safe.

“Rights” of Passage

I’ve mentioned a lot of different things the passenger can do to treat the pilot right, however there are a lot of things that you should expect from your pilot as well. I call this the “rights” of passage and it includes the following:

- You have a right to know what to expect on the flight. This means the pilot should talk to you about potential weather, turbulence, or winds. You should know approximately how long the flight will take, and what it will be like when you get to your destination. Key logistics such as name, phone number, and transport pertaining to the airport and lodgings, should be shared information.
- You should expect to be kept as comfortable as possible, within reason. Environmental controls and seat adjustments should be made, and sound dampening measures used to maintain comfort. Hearing protection is a must, and in particular for the sensitive ears of smaller children. It also doesn’t hurt to learn and be able to manipulate these gadgets yourself.
- You should be able to speak up when the phase of flight no longer requires silence. This means that if you aren’t feeling well, have a question about the flight or aircraft, or are unclear about anything, you should say something. In addition, there is a lot of potentially scary stuff that goes on during flights: flashing lights, aural alarms, weird engine and aircraft noises, and the like. This brings me to the final and most important “right” in the passenger bill of rights which is;
- You have the right to feel safe. If at *any* time you do not feel safe or are having any misgivings about the flight, let the pilot know! You should ask which beeps are cause for concern and which are “operation normal.” You can be a powerful safety-conscious advocate for the pilot, and you have every right to do so. In return, the pilot should do everything in his or her power to put you at ease.

Summertime travels can be the stuff that great memories are made from. With a little respect and understanding between the pilot and the passengers, every trip can be fun, exciting, and safe. Bon voyage! ✈️

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