

→ You're Grounded

But you don't have to be. Navigate the increasingly unfriendly skies with our layover-free guide to all things air travel—starting with the most pressing question of all.

Why is flying so miserable?

Everyone knows that the glamorous days when flying was a part of your vacation have vanished—but the reasons for this sad state of affairs are surprisingly complicated. The quick version goes like this: The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) has done a spectacularly poor job of managing our air-traffic-control (ATC) system, causing record-setting delays. Meanwhile, you can blame your wooden food and cramped knees on the penny-pinching airlines. Not a good-enough answer? We didn't think so, either. So we put together these 20 burning questions and then asked the experts.



What are pilots not telling you?

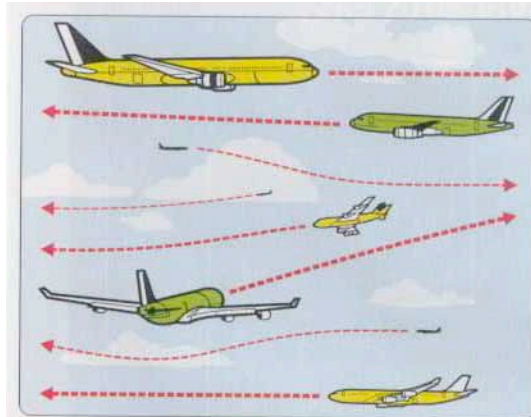
Surprising secrets from Captain Joe Burns, 46, a Denver-based United pilot

→ PSST... YOU CAN KEEP YOUR CELL ON.

Any one cell phone is not going to do anything to the aircraft. The problem is when you have a bunch together. We have such a wide variety of frequencies—from VOR navigation [VHF Omnidirectional Range] to GPS. We want to minimize the chance of any interference.

→ **THE AIR'S NOT SO BAD.** We have HEPA filters on the aircraft. People worry about catching colds on airplanes. But that's probably the purest air people breathe in their lives.

→ **THEY DO TAKE NAPS.** You're supposed to be at the controls for no more than eight hours at a time, and our international aircraft have bunkhouses up front.
—AS TOLD TO MICHAEL BEHAR



What happened to “free flight”?

Free flight—the notion that commercial pilots should pick their own routes to save fuel and shorten travel times—has been dying a slow death at the hands of the FAA, overseers of air-traffic control. The idea, first brought before Congress in 1994, is enchantingly simple: Pilots would fly the routes of their choosing and change those routes when necessary to avoid other planes. “Today, I have all the navigation capability I need to fly the way I want, anywhere I want,” says R. Michael Baiada, 58, a captain for United Airlines. But pilots have to do the bidding of ATC, and the low-tech system corrals aircraft into indirect, congested routes. Michael Boyd, an aviation consultant who’s testified before Congress on the subject of free flight, says ATC uses just 3 percent of available U.S. airspace. And because ATC’s technology is so out of date, controllers separate planes at great distances—imagine the traffic jam that would ensue if cars on an interstate had to stay 100 yards apart. Boyd estimates that free flight could be implemented for less than \$5 billion and be operational within three years. The system would free up more controllers to monitor takeoffs and landings, which would ease the congestion at major airports. But don’t expect to see free flight soon. Instead, the FAA is hard at work on its NextGen system, a \$15 billion technology update that should be ready sometime around 2025. —M.B.

Who's to blame for the record delays?

Look no further than the air-traffic-control tower—we're headed for scary times if something isn't done to fix the frightfully understaffed ATC system. Bob Stalker, 50, retired last year after working as a controller for 25 years. His most recent post was at Denver TRACON, which guides 120 flights per hour into Denver International. "They should have 63 controllers at Denver Approach," says Stalker. "By the end of 2007, they were down to 37." When ATC is short-staffed, Stalker explains, controllers will simply stop planes from landing, causing massive delays on the tarmac. Trace the problem to 1981, when Ronald Reagan fired more than 11,000 striking controllers. The FAA rounded up replacements, and today many of those controllers are hitting retirement age (mandatory at 56). To make matters worse, the FAA has cut incoming controllers' pay. "We have a 15-year low in the number of certified controllers," says Alex Caldwell, a spokeswoman for the National Air Traffic Controllers Association. What happens next is anyone's guess. The FAA is clueless, and cash-strapped airlines aren't about to start dropping flights. "Within the next year, the delays are going to get so bad you won't believe it," says Stalker. —M.B.

How can I protect my toys?

Lately, airlines have been getting stingy about checking gear—dinging you \$85 each way, for example, to fly your surfboard from San Diego to Oahu. Here's how to beat the system.

SHIP: Texas-based Sports Express (sportsexpress.com) ships door-to-door, handles bikes of all sizes and surfboards under 7'3", and guarantees on-time arrival in 21 countries.

HIDE: If you do check gear, use a nondescript coffin bag. If the



ticket agent asks what's inside, avoid using red-flag words like "board"—most airlines charge extra for surfboards even if they don't exceed the industry-standard 50-

pound weight limit.

BRIBE: A workaround: Check curbside and tip well. A properly rewarded skycap—\$20 should do—will usually wave your stuff through. —M.B.