



Nostalgia Trip

Looking back on his journey to becoming an avgeek, Howard Slutsken finds he still admires airplanes and the flight experience with the same childlike wonder he had as a boy.

BY HOWARD SLUTSKEN | ILLUSTRATION FELIPE MUHR



OK, I'll admit it. I'm the one who arrives at the airport hours early. I'm not worried about missing my flight, since I checked in online and know that it's only going to take me a few minutes if I go through security on the mezzanine level at YYZ. No, I'm here because I love airports, aircraft and the process of travel.

I'm a prepared passenger. I know my airport codes and airline abbreviations, and where in the plane I'll be sitting. I'm holding my laptop and 3-1-1 liquids pouch, and I'm ready to yank my belt out and put it all into the X-ray bin. After security, I have plenty of time to walk from one end of the building to the other, discovering the airport's new shops and figuring out which restaurant I'm going to visit in the terminal. There's probably a new art installation to ponder, a carpet pattern to tweet and hopefully a new spot from which to watch ramp operations.

I always make sure to bring a cleaning cloth in my briefcase, so I can wipe nose-prints from terminal windows to get clear shots of planes that just beg to be added to my photo collection. Every airport brings

new airlines, new liveries and new aircraft types. I'm not going through Sea-Tac (SEA) on this trip, but if I were, I would grab one of the comfortable rocking chairs in SEA's Central Terminal food court, with its perfect view of departing flights. Or I would planespot at Tokyo Haneda until the last possible minute before my flight, enjoying the views from the airport's well-designed outdoor observation decks. Look, it's ANA's Pokémon 777-300 logojet!

My obsession with all things aviation began on the outdoor deck of a terminal far from Tokyo. Growing up in Montreal, I was just three, maybe four years old in the late 1950s. To maintain our mom's sanity, my then 18-year-old brother, Jerry, took me out on weekends. We'd usually take a drive in his royal blue Riley sedan, and more often than not, we'd end up at Dorval Airport (YUL).

We'd stand and watch the snorting and rumbling piston-powered airliners, including beautiful Super Constellations and workhorse DC-3s. We'd listen to the shriek of turboprop Vickers Viscounts and Vikings, and watch in awe as elegantly dressed

passengers boarded the early jets, the DC-8s and 707s, bound for distant airports at unheard-of speeds.

I was an incredibly excited six-year-old during my first flight on a Trans-Canada Air Lines DC-8-43 from YUL to YYZ. Now, oh-so-many years later, I'm in line and watching an equally excited young boy board my flight from YYZ to YVR on an Air Canada 777-300ER. I wonder if he builds plastic airplane models any better than I did. I seem to recall being covered in the water-transfer decals, more ending up on my arms than on the model.

I don't build the plastic ones anymore, but I make sure to know the exact model of aircraft for my flights. It's important when I'm figuring out what seat to book. Daytime flight? Window. Evening flight? Window. Overnight? Window – I might get to see the northern lights. And I've got SeatGuru.com bookmarked, because a window seat isn't always a window seat. I thought I'd lose my marbles during a flight to Shanghai when my misaligned window seat gave me a 10-hour close-up view of the cabin sidewall. >





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But I've got the perfect window seat on this flight, just ahead of the 777's wing. It's a stormy summer evening in Toronto, and I watch the ramp crew working to get our flight ready to go. Between Terminal 1's piers, I can make out a dark asphalt outline on the ramp. It's all that remains of the 1960s-vintage Aeroquay, where I worked as a "ramp rat," back in the day.

I spent two fabulous summers at YYZ, marshaling, loading and unloading turboprop Convair 580s, contemporary jets like the DC-9s, 727s and 707s, and the then new wide-body DC-10s and 747s. Our crew was responsible for cabin cleaning on

I might be the only passenger who's noticed. Everyone else is engrossed in a movie. Ho-hum.

some flights, so I'd call dibs on the forward lavatory, galley and cockpit. Don't tell anyone, but I spent more time in the left seat than anywhere else, and even figured out how to turn up the radio volume to listen to the tower as I was tidying up the flight deck.

There was also that time I missed loading my parents' luggage onto an Alitalia 747 bound for Rome, and the family kerfuffle that ensued. Or when, with my lead's direction, I parked a baggage tractor a little too close to the safety line. The cowling of the #2 engine on the arriving British Airways 747 only ended up with a little scratch, honest. After a careful inspection, the outbound flight left on time, and I was relieved to have kept my job. For the rest of the summer, every time that 747 showed up at YYZ, the scratch was still there. G-AWNL was the plane's registration. I will never forget it.

I also remember being on a parked 707 that was blown about six feet by a powerful summer thunderstorm. Tonight, we're delayed by lines of nasty storms west of the airport, so I've made a nest at my seat, and have the moving map ready on the in-flight entertainment (IFE) system display. I have a feeling that the first part of the flight is going to be sporty, as the pilots pick the

best route through the thunderstorms. And I think I'll gently help my anxious seatmate by explaining everything that's happening.

The 777's mighty GE90 engines launch us into the air, and I can see that we're flying an unusual flightpath as we leave YYZ's airspace. Lightning is flashing, and in the darkening twilight, I can make out the towering clouds all around us. It's bumpy, but the aircraft is solid as we weave our way over southern Ontario. But then, I hear a muffled "boom," and see lightning stream from the wingtip. I think we've had a lightning strike! Exciting, but not a problem for this 777 or any other commercial aircraft. I look around, and I might be the only passenger who's noticed. Everyone else is engrossed in a movie on the IFE system, listening to music or playing a game on their personal device. Ho-hum.

Once clear of the storms, our flight makes up some time across Canada and lands at YVR a few hours later. I hoped to ask the flight crew about our meteorological close encounter, but my usual post-flight need to "decant" takes precedence. Doesn't matter, I've got another great story to tell. "Guess what happened on my flight from Toronto last week?" ■