

FREQUENT FLIER; Vodka for the Pilots but Not for Me or the Goat

By **WILLIAM F. SCHULZ; AS TOLD TO CHRISTOPHER ELLIOTT.** (NYT) 649 words

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Although I have flown an average of three to four times a week for the last 26 years, my hands still sweat on takeoff. I know all the statistics about aviation safety, but my heart still beats faster until we're at cruising altitude.

I've been to some pretty scary places during my years with Amnesty International -- most recently Darfur, Sudan, where the tragic toll of ethnic cleansing mounts daily. A little aerophobia is a small price to pay for trying to make the world a better place.

Sometimes I even feel safer in the air than on the ground. And that's saying a lot. Flying from New Delhi to Hyderabad, India, many years ago, for example, I was startled to hear the pilot announce as we approached an intermediate stop: "I'm sorry to have to tell you that the equipment we have been issued for this flight is too large for the runway we are approaching. Do not be alarmed when we exit the runway into a squash field."

Sure enough, shortly after we landed, well-mashed squash splattered our windows.

But that experience was far less unnerving than a flight I took in the early days of post-Soviet Russia, well before Aeroflot had shed its unenviable reputation for accidents. My seatmate on a late night flight from Moscow to Syktyvkar, 600 miles north of the Arctic Circle, was a goat. It was a well-behaved, clean-smelling goat who slept through the entire flight. But it was a goat, nonetheless.

When I saw the flight attendant emerge from the bulkhead with two enormous bottles of vodka, I anticipated my stress would soon evaporate. Why, perhaps when the attendant got to my seat with the vodka, I could ask for the goat's share.

But I never got the chance. The vodka was not intended for the passengers. It was for the pilots.

Still, I often feel nothing but relief when I finally make it into my seat and the plane has lifted off. That was the case when I departed Monrovia, Liberia, where Charles Taylor, the rebel leader and later president, had threatened to have me assassinated. I didn't mind a bit that the Air Ivoire pilot spent the entire flight to Abidjan in the restroom with the flight attendant.

Nor was I sorry to fly out of Nyala, the capital of South Darfur, Sudan, this past September, since fighting had encircled the city. I was glad not to be returning to Khartoum the same way I had come to Nyala: on a converted Soviet cargo plane flown by Sudan Airways (oxygen bags not included).

"You know," a colleague said as we taxied out, "the U.S. Embassy will not allow its

employees to fly Sudan Air."

But even flying Sudan Air would have been less nerve-wracking, I'm sure, than the five checkpoints we had to pass on the way to the Nyala airport, each one manned by a nervous boy soldier who took delight in poking his AK-47 into our faces through the front window of our S.U.V.

I'll keep on traveling by air despite my mild case of the jitters. Every time I take off, after all, I'm reminded that, unlike many of the people on the ground in the places I visit, I have the luxury of leaving.

Photo: WILLIAM F. SCHULZ -- Executive director, Amnesty International USA in New York (Photo by Jennifer S. Altman for The New York Times)

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