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Exercise your constitutional rights in the air

Simon Calder: The Man Who Pays His Way

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"And here's a whistle to attract attention." The likelihood that you will find yourself bobbing about in the North Atlantic, wearing a lifejacket that you've managed to keep fully inflated with the help of that natty little top-up valve, and that someone will actually hear your plaintive whistle, is immeasurably small.

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Indeed, I have trawled back through the records to try to find the last occasion when lifejackets saved souls upon a British airliner that had ditched in the sea. Over the past 30 years, I have found no examples at all. Yet each time you board a plane in the UK, you get an elaborate safety briefing about how to secure that lifejacket with a double bow.

You will not, though, receive the most basic advice on how to keep your circulation flowing. Doctors at Heathrow's local hospital say that deep vein thrombosis has killed 30 people in the last three years. The blood clot strikes within minutes of the passenger arriving on a long-haul flight.

The airlines, having gone to inordinate lengths to help us drift around a wintry North Atlantic, seem unwilling to tell passengers about the simple steps to reduce the risk of deep vein thrombosis. Taking a constitutional around the cabin every hour - or, given the constraints in economy class, flexing your feet regularly - are remarkably effective in stimulating circulation and preventing blood clots.

Neither do the airlines offer much advice before the flight. In the current British Airways timetable, four of the 320 pages are devoted to health - but for animals, not for people. The essentials to transport your pooch safely are covered in great detail; for example, the rules say its nose and paws "should not be able to fit through any ventilation opening or door mesh".

The only reference to in-flight health for humans is a three-line mention buried at the bottom of a promotion for First Class. True, there are seven Travel Health Tips offered by BA Travel Clinics (motto: "When all you want to catch is the plane"). These include profound insights such as "Take care with food and drink" and "Be sensible in the sun". The risks of the flight itself are not mentioned, even though every five weeks someone drops dead at Heathrow after stepping off a long-haul aircraft.

* To call deep vein thrombosis Economy Class Syndrome is to miss the point that the cause is sitting immobile for hours on end in *any* class (or, indeed, a deck-chair). There is inevitably a higher incidence at the back of the plane, where conditions are much more cramped and where the opportunities to stretch your legs are commensurately less. Being 6ft 2in, I would gladly pay 20 per cent extra for 20 per cent more legroom. Yet this is possible only with charter flights where you can pay a supplement for an emergency exit row.

On scheduled flights the price of a little more personal space is disproportionately high. BA's World Traveller Plus - or

Premium Economy, as Virgin Atlantic describes it - costs at least four times as much as the cheapest economy seat. The business class fare is an absurd 20 times as expensive.

So we rebels without a footstool must take matters into our own hands. For transatlantic flights, consider Icelandair - where you have no choice but to get off the plane and walk around halfway through the journey, when the plane stops at Keflavik airport. Or take advantage of low fares on Air India, which offers business class to Chicago or New York for as little as £700 return.

* For journeys further afield, try pretending that the long-haul jet has not been invented. Fares on airline alliances, such as Oneworld and the Star Alliance, can take you to Australasia or Asia in a series of short hops.

Peter Grimes of Quest Travel (020 8547 3322) has devised a Star Alliance circumnavigation that takes you around the world in flights that are mostly four hours or less: London-Vienna-Dubai-Bangkok-Singapore-Bali-Darwin-Alice Springs-Sydney-Christchurch-Auckland-Fiji-Cook Islands-Los Angeles-Denver-Chicago-London. The only long-hauls are across the Pacific and Atlantic, and the fare is £1,297.

* Last week I described how an easyRentacar customer had e-mailed a copy of a bus ticket to prove that she should not have been charged a £100 late return fee. This week, there have been dozens of complaints about the no-frills car rental company.

Neil Ferguson of Glasgow was in possession of a rented car in Provence during the fuel protests that paralysed France last summer. When it became clear that he would not have enough fuel to get the vehicle back to Nice airport, he called easyRentacar: "I agreed we would leave the car at a secure location and they would collect the car once the fuel strike was over. There was absolutely no suggestion we would be charged a penalty for late return."

A £300 charge appeared on his next credit-card statement. "The irony in this whole affair," says Dr Ferguson, "is that we could have 'accidentally' forgotten to apply the handbrake and allowed the car to roll off the Corniche into the Mediterranean - the cost to us would have been just the £100 insurance excess!"

Murdo Macdonald of Strathpeffer had problems at the same depot: "My wife and I rented a car at Nice in October. We returned the car without damage, but, because we were catching an early flight, there was no one from the company to check it in. Our next credit-card bill had £100 deducted by easyRentacar."

Dr Macdonald had a "fruitless correspondence with its computerised e-mail service, culminating in an automatically generated reply in Dutch, a language in which I have zero competence." So he wrote, in English, demanding either documented proof of damage (a photograph or a detailed repair bill) or a refund plus £50 for the inconvenience involved. "I heard nothing for two weeks, and so I wrote to my MP. His intervention had a dramatic effect, and suddenly my letter which had been 'lost' was found, £150 was credited to my account, and I had a phone call from the operations manager with assurances that the like would never happen again."

What, I wondered, happens if an easyRentacar breaks down? The small print on the website is opaque, but it appears the company can wash its hands of the matter and just refund the money "relating to the unexpired portion of the rental period". Unless you complain to your MP.

NEITHER IS easyJet's much-trumpeted refund-if-you're-four-hours-late policy quite as good as it appears. Philip Suter arrived home from Nice two days late because of snow at Luton, but finds he is ineligible for a refund:

"We were booked on a series of flights, each cancelled before the four-hour deadline." Another piece of easySmallprint excludes passengers who had agreed "to transfer on to an alternative easyJet flight, which then departed within four hours of its scheduled time of departure."

Mr Suter has also had some dealings with easyRentacar. He suggests photographing or videoing the car when you drop it off - ideally with an accurate clock in the background.

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