

Backward Loading—Or Is It Loading Backward?

Lots of people compare getting on an airplane with loading a cattle car, and I can see the similarities. We're a line of dumb, dazed, and—after a visit to the airport's Burger King and TCBY—fattened creatures being herded into a cramped tube in a process that is completely out of our control. And the mooing. The constant mooing. Only then do we see that we are to be deposited into a space so small that, if we were real cattle, PETA would be shaming us with billboard photos of it.

If we are lucky, we've remembered to pack a carryon no bigger than a box of Tic Tacs, thereby leaving us enough room to put it into the overhead compartment that the other people have already stuffed with luggage the size of a standard-issue futon. Then it's into the seat/straight-jacket, and we're ready to stare into space, waiting for the magic words that let us turn our iPods back on—"We have now reached ten thousand feet. We are no longer in danger of having your \$100 electronic gadget wreck our \$100 million airplane."

Now I know there is little room to make this sequence of events less pleasant. Yet the industrious folks at United airlines have decided that this process is just not annoying and tedious enough. On a trip my wife and I took to San Diego, I decided to save a few bucks by forgoing the nonstop service on Alaska Airlines and taking the cheaper United connection through San Francisco. While it may seem perfectly logical to turn a two-hour jaunt into a six-hour ordeal, I came to realize ordeals are not all they're cracked up to be. Notwithstanding the fact that almost every single store and restaurant in the San Francisco airport was being remodeled and would reopen at about the time when the Sun was a smoldering cinder, we had to get on an airplane not twice during our trip, but four times. Thus I was exposed to United's mind-bending loading policy in excruciating detail, made all the more apparent because my wife and I were sitting at opposite ends of the plane.

I don't want you to think that was my idea. Using Orbitz' easy-to-use online reservation system, I had taken the time to reserve seats for us TOGETHER. In seats that were SEQUENTIAL in both letter and number. But UNITED did not seem to honor this arrangement and SCREWED us. They have a lovely electronic check-in system that we

whizzed right through, except for the fact that it wouldn't let us change seat assignments. No matter, I thought. I had just wanted to change to the exit row so that my knees wouldn't serve as earmuffs for me during the flight. But it's a short trip, and as long as I'm sitting next to my wife...

Hey, wait a minute, I thought, 45 minutes later, just as we were about to get on the plane. We're NOT sitting together. She's in 11A and I'm way, way in the back. If it were a ticket to a baseball game, my boarding pass would have said Section 904, Row ZZ, Seat 78, Obstructed View. Of course, by this time they were loading the plane, so it was far too late to do anything about it. Except whine. It's never too late for that.

It was at this critical moment that we noticed that our boarding passes had another number on them. Hers had a 1, and mine had a 3. Using my awesome, and at times frightening, powers of deduction, I realized that United had a simple way to tell passengers when they could board the plane. Of course, since I was in the back of the plane, they would call for passengers with 3 on their tickets first. Of course, I was an idiot.

United called for passengers with 1 on their tickets, thereby loading those at the front of the plane first. All other airlines on planet Earth load the back of the airplane first (an exception is usually made for those with small children, and in the case of eastern European airlines, those with live poultry). This process is universally used for one reason: people take for-fricking-ever to get on a plane. And if someone is trying to manhandle his futon into the overhead compartment, everyone behind him has to wait. Which, of course, brings up the question: Doesn't "manhandle my futon" sound vaguely naughty?

But it also brings up other questions: Why does United use this perverse and, some would say, inhuman method for boarding a plane? Why does the flight attendant keep telling people to clear the aisles to let other people past when their ridiculous policy is the reason for the bottleneck in the first place? Why did one flight attendant throw her hands up in disgust and say "It's not up to us" when I asked her why they were doing it that way? And why do people bring along laptops on the plane just so they can play solitaire? Don't they know laptops also come with minesweeper?

I can think of only one reason why United loads their planes this way: the person

who came up with the policy is clinically insane. So I call upon United to place this person in a warm, padded environment where he can no longer hurt himself or others and hire someone with expertise at least equivalent to, say, an Irish setter. With any luck, this person will reinstitute the aforementioned universal—that is, correct—policy of loading the people in the back first. Then I can choose United confident in the knowledge that, if I'm sitting in the uncomfortable rear part of the plane, I can be sure that I didn't block the way for those lucky heifers sitting in front of me. Moo.