

◀ like a bulldog – able to withstand the huge g-forces and stresses of extreme aerobatics.

Fired up, the engine throbs right through our bodies as we wait on the runway for control tower clearance. It comes and we lurch forwards, the engine roaring on full throttle as Darren pitches *Scarlett* into the sky after an incredibly short run. Just for a ‘warm up’ he buzzes low and fast along the runway. Really low – we’re talking mere metres – and then tips us skywards.

My brain does its own run through of somersaults.

‘You’re in control,’ Darren says matter-of-factly, and I am... Blimey, I am! The control stick is ridiculously small in my sweating hands and the slightest nudge sideways has the aircraft tipping instantly. It’s just so sensitive.

With the wind buffeting and the clouds zipping past, it’s hard enough just to keep us level, let alone perform the slow roll that Darren suggests. ‘The trick is to keep your gaze on a point in the distance,’ he says. ‘Don’t worry about airspeed and the like, I’ll do that for you.’

STICK AND RUDDER

As the plane banks to the left its weight and physics make it want to ‘sideslip’ towards the ground so you have to counter that with a combination of stick and rudder control. As the plane banks further over, as the ground replaces the sky and vice versa, these forces increase. To say it’s a little tricky is an understatement.

‘You have control,’ I murmur, and Darren acknowledges.

‘I didn’t want to tell you at the start, but most pilots feel a little queasy on their first *Pitts* flight,’ he says. He can certainly count me among that number.

‘Right, ready for the loop then. You’re not allowed in a *Pitts* unless you do a loop,’ he chuckles. And before I can say a word, we’re pitching skywards, all my bodyweight straining against the seat harness as the clouds swing past and over and there’s a sickening moment of weightlessness at the top of the loop. Then the engine whines higher and it’s up and over we go, the earth swinging round into view and then back behind us as we level out. I’m speechless. And breathless.

But being airborne doesn’t get much better than this. ■

www.advancedflying.co.uk

Why we no longer enjoy flying

It took a jar of Colman's Mustard to convince me that terrorism's victory was complete. Passing through security control at Stansted airport, I stood behind a dignified Italian who stared with incredulity as a uniformed inspector confiscated six jars of this great English condiment from his hand luggage. Officially classified as "liquids", they apparently contravened the humiliating restrictions introduced at our airports.

The sun had yet to rise, but already Stansted was bursting at the seams with anxious passengers. Many clutched small, transparent plastic bags, revealing the medications, face-saving creams and ego-boosting fragrances vital to their existence. At the entrance to Departures, thick-skinned jobsworths were already ruining people's days because their carry-on luggage did not meet the permitted rules.

None of us doubts the importance of anti-terrorist measures, but it is sad that the threat of terrorism – now seemingly permanent – had to coincide with the boom in low-cost flights. Anyone who has arrived at Stansted at 5 am, expecting to breeze through check-in, grab a coffee, then wing on down to sunny Spain, will understand the shock of finding that this once serene, airy terminal is as busy and merciless as the first day of the New Year sales.

How can this be? Flying used to be such fun, so exciting that your mother would buy a new outfit just for the terminal. Air travel should be an exhilarating miracle, yet we are in danger of losing touch with its inherent pleasures.

Our principal airports have become hastily fortified shopping malls, where police carrying machine guns patrol often windowless halls and passengers are treated like two-footed processed peas. In this charmless, airless, garishly lit, bun-fight atmosphere, flying simply seems the quickest way to get out of the airport.

These days many airline staff seem not to care. A few weeks ago, when I arrived at an airport with my wife for a long-planned romantic weekend in Rome, we were abruptly told that the flight had been cancelled, with not one word of apology or commiseration. "Go and join that queue," the assistant snapped, turning back to her computer. And I thought I was a paying customer...

The experience of flying must be made enjoyable again, and there are steps we can all take to rediscover its joys. This is why I will always be booking a window seat.

Can I be the only traveller left who loves being caught in a holding pattern above Heathrow? Round and round we go, looking down at the undulating patchwork of Greater London, with its terraced houses and landmarks, its toy-like motorways and pie-chart sewage-works.

Everyone else on board is fretting and cursing about the delay, but I'm blissfully happy with my head in the clouds. And there are still those romantic souls among us who consider flying an amazing treat; who love to look down at the virgin snow capping the Alps, trace the faint roads crossing the sands of Arabia and marvel at how the chilly wastes of Canada go on and on and on.

Unfortunately, flying has become so commonplace, and at times so dirt-cheap, that we forget to value it. Business travellers want aisle seats, to get off that little bit quicker. The stag parties barely notice that they are 32,000 feet closer to heaven. Look around and everyone's plugged in, watching Hugh Grant do his three facial expressions and waiting for the free ice creams.

Will the glamour of flying ever return? I doubt whether we will see a significant easing of the security measures – so please, let's all wake up and co-operate with those beleaguered airport staff. Much of the delay at security is caused by people who are ignorant of long-standing regulations, or choose to ignore them – the time-wasting dimwits with keys in their pockets and toothpaste in their holdalls. Maybe we need two queues, one labelled Switched-on, the other Stupid...

It's small wonder, too, that many of us are rethinking our travel plans, choosing calmer regional airports and high-speed rail services; booking simpler, greener holidays closer to home; or just giving up and letting TV travel shows do it for us.

For the rest of us, it's probably best to buy some noise-cancelling headphones, bag that window seat and accept that the speed and convenience of flying are still too good to ignore. As Amelia Earhart put it after her pioneering solo flight across the Atlantic in 1932, "Flying might not be all plain sailing, but the fun of it is worth the price."

Unless you are passing through Stansted at 5 am.

Nigel Tisdall. Published in The Daily Telegraph 21st March 2008

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