

Butch's Travel Tips

By Butch Oxendine, ASGA Executive Director



I admit: I'm a jaded, tired, and often grumpy traveler. I've been shoe-horned into the middle seat of a cross-country flight. I've sat next to crying babies, obnoxious cell-phone abusers, and limburger cheese-eating adults. And I have endured the cackling of a flight full of ex-Sweet Potato queens.

Here are a few of my time-tested tips that could help make your future travel a little more bearable. If you have tips to add, write butch@asgaonline.com.

AIR TRAVEL TIPS



1. **Sit up front on the first "leg" of a flight.** On a trip to Philadelphia, I was seated in the "back of the bus" but had 20 minutes to get to the next flight after landing. It always takes at least 10 minutes to "deplane." Fortunately, my gate was close or I would have missed the connection.
2. **Don't "check" bags.** Going to D.C., my flight was cancelled, but I quickly switched to another because I had no checked bags. I save at least 30 minutes because I don't have to wait for my bags to get loaded on the carousel-- and there's no lost baggage either (unless I leave my laptop at the airport TGI Fridays).
3. **Check available seats on-line.** Just before I leave for the airport, I find out if there are open seats (rare nowadays), then switch to a row that would give me more leg-and-work space. Nowadays, I always get my boarding pass online before I head to the airport. I also check available seats then and try to move to a row with empty seats. It works pretty often.
4. **Put on a headset so you won't be interrupted.** I'm usually pretty anti-social and bury my nose in work. My wife, however, always chats with seat-mates and recently learned a lot about climate of Vermont (which is fascinating to us because it's always so stinking hot here in Florida).
5. **Be ready to get on first when your "zone" or seating row is called.** I always loiter right near the ticket counter, knowing that the later I board, the harder it will be to stow my bags in the overhead bins which are usually jam-packed. I also often pay extra for "priority boarding" or "extra" seats with more leg-room.
6. **Check-in online at the airline's Web site.** When I don't have bags to check, I get my boarding passes on-line and save at least 15 minutes waiting in line at the airport.

7. **You can get a whole can of soda just by asking.** With that said, there are airlines charging more to check bags and reserve a seat. Airlines take notice: I will not pay \$2 for a can of Coke (no Pepsi)!

8. **Stop That!** When I find myself next to a disobedient child, I have entertainment for the whole trip! "How many times do I have to tell you to stop that, Jimmy?" I guess at least one more time, Mom.

9. **Check-in at least 45 minutes before your flight.** Most airline computers "shut down" on checking in new passengers. No exceptions. One of our speakers learned this first-hand and it cost an extra \$400.

10. **Be ready to use other forms of transportation.** One time, my connecting-flight from DC was cancelled when New York had a freak blizzard. While waiting for the first leg to take off, I got on the Web and look at other ways I could get there (Amtrak train, Greyhound bus, rental car). Luckily, DC has an Amtrak stop, and I booked my ticket on-line, then later got a refund on the cancelled second "leg" of my flight.

11. **Know the phone number of your airline.** I'm always ready to switch to an alternative airport or airline in case my flight is cancelled. Coming back from Newark, rainy conditions cancelled my flight. I got on the Web and found flights out of another New York airport, got a refund, then bought a ticket on a different airline and arranged a taxi to get me there.

12. **Early flights are almost always on-time.** Traveling late at night, flights are usually late.

13. **Taking the last flight out at night is risky.** Why? It's far more likely to be oversold (you could be "bumped" involuntarily) and late-night flights are usually late. While in Dallas, my flight was cancelled and I couldn't do anything except wait until the next morning.

14. **Take off your shoes.** At ASGA conferences, I'm on my feet all day and get "tender tootsies" (named by my daughter Leah). OK, I know I may "smoke out" my seatmate. But when I make "fists" with my toes" on the carpet, everything seems right as rain.

14. **No "loyalty" here.** I have absolutely zero "loyalty" to any airline. I choose based on fare cost and schedule. I scour search sites such as Kayak. Who cares if I don't build up "miles" with one particular carrier-- it's way more difficult to use your miles nowadays anyway, as there are so many blackout dates and times.

15. **Fly nonstop.** I try hard to get a non-stop flight and usually can if I'm flying out of a large airport into a major city. It's so much easier to get on the plane, stow my bags once, and get my bags at the other end. The "door-to-door" time to get there is a lot quicker than waiting for connections, deplaning, and walking to another gate.

16. **Don't give up your bag!** On a flight to DC, I was in zone 8, so I was one of the last to board the plane. I had an important carry-on with me, not wanting to check it for fear of losing it. It was critical. But there were no overhead bins left. So the flight attendant

snatched my bag and "checked it." I thought I would pick it up by the door when I got off the plane, but it wasn't there. I didn't get it until the next day, just 30 minutes before our conference started. Boy were we sweating it out!

17. Twilight "zone." What do the boarding "zones" mean? I've found out that airlines have determined how to most quickly and efficiently get passengers in their seats. If you have an aisle seat, you'll be in zone 6-8 and if you're in the back of the plane you'll also get a high zone.

18. Gimme that! Going through security in Dallas, the guy in front of me had a computer that looked exactly like mine. As our computers came out of the x-ray machine, he accidentally grabbed mine and me his. Fortunately, he immediately noticed his mistake. Whew! That could have been a disaster. When I got home, I put a big ASGA sticker on my computer!

19. Moo Mess. Watch out when you open those little non-diary creamers for your coffee. They spray out! Open it away from you or you'll soak your poor seatmate!

20. Overhead Crush. Please, please, please, put your carry-on bag "wheels-first" in the bin overhead and put your "personal" item (computer, purse, back-pack) under your seat. That will let just about everyone have a space for their bags without having to check them into oblivion. Another top: if you're later in boarding, there won't be a lot of space left. As you're walking down the aisle toward your seat, put your bag in any open space BEFORE your seat. That will allow you to easily pick it up when you deplane.

RENTAL CAR TIPS



1. **Join the free "member clubs"** that most rental-car companies offer. I love it when I can walk from the baggage area directly to my car: no lines and no paperwork!

2. **Find out if your rental-car company is located "on-site" at the airport.** In Dallas, it takes an hour to get from arrivals to the rental-car facility as the shuttle lurches to each pick-up spot around the airport. What a waste of time!

3. **Buy your own gas.** The rental car companies will hike up the gas cost by two or three times the normal cost at the pump if they have to fill up.

PARKING TIPS



1. **Write down your row and level.** In the airport parking garage, I always write down the row and level and put it in my pocket and also in my briefcase. When I get back and am dragging, I don't have to struggle to remember where I parked.

2. **Always assume the first few levels in the garage are full.** I just immediately go to the top or near the top. You can waste 10-15 minutes prowling for a parking spot.

2. **Short-term or long-term?** I don't know about you, but when I get back from a trip I don't want to have to wait for the parking shuttle and lug my junk around for another 30 minutes. I want to go directly to my car and leave. You can save money by parking at the long-term lot, no doubt about it. But you have to weigh the costs vs. the convenience.

HOTEL TIPS



1. **Use the airport as your hotel (or sleep in your car).** It's not classy, but it is cheap. Sometimes I get done so late at night that paying \$150 for a hotel room for four hours of sleep doesn't make much sense.

2. **Book way-ahead on the Web.** I often can save a lot by paying in advance. But beware: the discount usually comes with no-refunds.

3. **Don't trust the hotel shuttle.** If you're in a hurry, you might want to get a taxi or rental car. In Boston recently, I waited at the airport for an hour before the hotel shuttle showed up. I'm pretty sure hotels won't run the shuttle generally for a single passenger. It's just not financially efficient.